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THE HISTORY OF EGG PANDERVIL

By the same Author

THE WORLD IN BUD
THE SPANISH CARAVEL
THE PANTHER
THE BAKER'S CART
MR. GODLY BESIDE HIMSELF
THE STREET OF THE EYE

THE HISTORY OF EGG PANDERVIL

A PURE FICTION

BY

GERALD BULLETT

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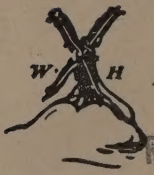

BOROUGH OF
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To
N. T.

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But, Esora, thy face wears a puzzled look. One thing puzzles me, she answered, for I cannot think what could have put it into his head that he was sent into the world to suffer for others. For are we not all suffering for others?

THE BROOK KERITH

CHAPTER THE FIRST

THE BROTHERS

I

'And now you're fit to kiss the ladies!' said his father, lifting Nicky Pandervil out of the bath and planting him carefully on the cork mat. 'Or will be,' he added, with pretended fierceness, 'when I've done with you.' Egg Pandervil flung a towel round his son's steaming body and began rubbing him down vigorously. The child grinned his infinite appreciation of the ritual. He liked being bathed by his father, far better than by Selina Bush, who, though kind enough in general, sometimes made frightful faces at him till she became a different person, a person called Mrs Murky. At such times he had to hide his eyes and scream out: 'Oh, do come back, Sleena! Mrs Murky's after me!' And Selina, resuming her proper self, would tell him, with her wide eyes feasting on his terror, that the noise made by the last rush of bath-water through the plughole was the ghost of Mrs Murky threatening to come again next time. His father did none of these things. His father always let him soak a good long time, and always shewed an in-

terest when Nicky said, as he seldom failed to say: 'I say, Dad! Look at my place!' For Nicky, on the inside of his right leg, just above the ankle, had a magnificent 'place', which served to keep in memory how two years ago he had climbed in at the scullery window and stepped into a copper full of boiling water, and, not content with that naughtiness, had afterwards scratched one of the blisters so that it burst and left an everlasting mark, at first a matter for reproach, but now a source of great pride and joy on bath-nights.

'What ladies shall I kiss?' asked Nicky, placing his hands on Mr Pandervil's shoulders to prevent himself being tumbled over. But he did not stay for an answer. 'When you've dried me, will you polish me, please?'

'Dessay,' said Mr Pandervil. Rubbing and scrubbing him with the warm towel Mr Pandervil emitted a hissing sound. 'That's what ostlers do when they rub the horses down,' he explained. 'How d'you like being a horse, hey?'

These two Pandervils seldom expected answers from each other, and still more seldom got them. Though half a century divided them, they were alike in this: that each had acquired the habit of living alone, apart, inside himself. There was understanding between them, imperfect but sufficient for everyday intercourse. During the past year or two Nicky and his father had struck up more than an acquaintance, positively a friendship; for Mrs Pandervil's increasing ill-health threw them together. There were certain things, like

this bathing, that the child could not, at seven years old, do for himself, or could do only under supervision; and, Selina Bush, the Elp, being often too busy with housework to sustain her accustomed minor role of nursemaid, Mr. Pandervil, to his surprise, had found himself playing mother to Nicky, and, still more to his surprise, he enjoyed it—so far as with all his anxious preoccupations he had time or capacity to enjoy anything. He was a worried little man, nearing sixty. Instinctively one calls him little, for though he was of medium height he was slim and with advancing years had acquired the habit of stooping. His head was bald on the crown, but fringed with silken hair that just missed being black; his mutton-chop whiskers were of a pale reddish colour flecked copiously with grey; his eyes were light brown and at once eager and tired; his nose was straight and thin, and his brow deeply furrowed. In moments of indignation, and in moments of pain, he would thrust forward his sharp shaven chin in a gesture weakly aggressive; when he smiled, his mouth widened generously, like a boy's, and his eyes became little suns with fine wrinkles radiating from them. At the moment, but for Nicky, he had little occasion for smiling. The ups and downs of his grocery shop, that bother between Mabe and Dan, Bob's impending marriage to a girl who was no better than she oughta bin, Harold's reluctance to carry on the business, the way the paper kept peeling in the parlour, the big stores round the corner that was

trying to make Pandervil's look small, and most of all Mrs Pandervil's nerves, always, a dismal undercurrent in any reverie, Mrs Pandervil's nerves—such things as these had made Mr Pandervil forget that there was anything in the world so fresh, so unspoiled, so comparatively happy as young Nicholas. He had made the re-discovery unconsciously, and was only now fully aware of having made it. Nicky was by over ten years the youngest of his children, the errant Bob being twenty-one, the restive Harold eighteen, and Mabe, wife of the unsatisfactory Daniel Finch, twenty-seven turned. Nobody quite knew how Nicky had occurred; it had seemed at the time an unfortunate miracle. And nobody, least of all his parents, was pleased to see him; but Mr Pandervil was by now more than reconciled to the child's existence.

'Dry as dry,' said Mr Pandervil briskly. 'And that's the driest thing there is, I'll be bound!' Nicky, with a beatific smile, raised his two arms like a diver, and chuckled with joy to find himself being enveloped in his nightshirt. He experienced anew that moment of delicious suspense, the fear lest he should be smothered before his head found its way out of the garment. 'And now for bed!' said Mr Pandervil. He seized the child in his arms and carried him like a bundle to his bedroom. Safe in bed, tucked up comfortably and insured against all nocturnal danger by having recited the verse of a hymn and invoked the magic Name, Nicky confidently asked his father to tell him a story.

'Dessay,' answered Mr Pandervil evasively,

concealing the fact that, as always, he was immensely pleased and flattered by the request. His relations with the child were still exquisitely tinged with a shyness that was like the bloom on a ripening plum, or like the tremor of delight that comes with the first breath and the first green shoot of spring. Years ago—occasionally and with little pleasure—he had nursed Mabel, Bob, Harold; but in those days, to which he looked back across the chasm of Mrs Pandervil's nervous disorders, he had been smarting with too fresh a sense of disappointment to take much account of paternity and its incidental joys. Perhaps, had his memory been better, he could have recalled some little stab of wonder in these small lives; and perhaps some faint vibration from the past did in fact enrich, without his knowing it, such moments as he was experiencing now. But if the strings were plucked the music was muted; if the rhythm persisted, the melody was none the less forgotten; and his pleasure in Nicky came therefore with the sharpness of surprise. He was sometimes casual or jolly or playfully gruff with the child, because, being secretly awed by his smallness, his youngness, his coltish beauty, secretly a little intimidated by the clear candour of his gaze, he had not even yet learned to be always quite at ease with him. But for the most part his demeanour reflected Nicky's own joyous gravity. He was happier with Nicky than with anyone else, for Nicky quickened within him the sense—against all reason—that happiness still existed.

'Will you, please?' said Nicky again.

'A story. Dunno any stories.'

'Tell me,' said Nicky, 'about when you were my size.'

'Well,' began Mr Pandervil, 'when I was your size I lived with my Par'n'mah 'n Uncle Algy 'n Aunt Sarah in the country. On a farm it was. Green fields. Pigs'n'geese . . . '

'Reelly pigs?' cried the town-bred Nicky, whose knowledge of pigs, outside picture-books, was confined to the elegant corpses hanging in Mr Catch's shop. 'Tell me s'more, Dad.'

Mr Pandervil, delighted to have made a sensation with mere pigs, warmed to his task, became exuberant, and the bag of his memory bulged with wilder fowl. 'Cows, too, with long horns, Nicky, 'n sheep, *and* a big black ram, what's more . . . ' Mr Pandervil, seeing his listener enthralled, tasted the first sweets of authorship.

From this indulgence a voice in the front bedroom recalled him.

'Eggie, dear!' It was a querulous voice.

The light faded from Nicky's eyes. His father's face fell.

'Did you call, Mother!' answered Mr Pandervil feebly.

A loud sigh, a sigh that resembled a groan. Then sharply; 'Eggie dear! It's only your dying wife as wants to speak to you.'

Mr Pandervil, found guilty of forgetting his wife's sad state, started up in haste, blew out Nicky's candle, and stole down the corridor to the

conjugal bedroom, leaving untold the strange exciting story (thought Nicky) of his earlier life.

2

It was not, by other standards than Nicky's, a remarkable story, unless any human life, involving as it does the paradox of unity in flux and the translation of the tangible world into the stuff of consciousness, offers us a microcosm of the universal mystery. Egbert Pandervil was one of a family of twelve children, five sons and seven daughters, all born (and four buried) within a period of twenty years to William Pandervil and Elizabeth his wife. William was the youngest son of a wealthy Guernseyman; and in 1830, having been cast off by his father for marrying a pretty kitchen wench met during his last year at Cambridge, he had migrated to the Midlands and set up as a gentleman farmer. His gentility was less questionable than his farming, but he continued to the day of his death paying rent to the local pontiff, and continued absent-mindedly, after the fashion of his times, begetting children for whom, as it seemed, no adequate provision was likely to be made. As a farmer, however unsuccessful, he can hardly have been ignorant of the laws of reproduction; yet it was always with a certain air of surprise, and often with some slight indignation, that he learned of his wife's pregnancy. Elizabeth, English and rustic to the core, was admirable both as wife and mother: lusty, good-natured, provident, and, outside her particular sphere, comfortably stupid. Her chil-

dren for the most part took after her, and devoted though she was to her husband she was thankful for it. Egbert was one of the fruits of his parents' middle period of fecundity, a period when, after Sarah and William and Frederick, they had begun to feel the need of a more gaudy nomenclature. Algernon and Felicia, as well as Egbert, paid the price of this parental fancy. Egbert was of the three the most unfortunate. The Pandervil boys were all given schooling of sorts, and it was a happy day for Egbert's schoolmates when they found that by calling him Good Egg or Bad Egg they could reduce him to tearful rage.

Egg remembered his father as a gentle ironical man whose permanent mood was one of controlled exasperation; he was bookish, perverse, wrapped in silence; when he spoke it was in that tone of infinite patience which is more eloquent of bitterness than the most savage curse. He had the air of one who having been disappointed of his dearest ambition takes refuge not in anger, not in the vice of communicating his misery, but in a habit of sardonic resignation. Kindly by nature and in intention, though too deeply self-absorbed to avoid unkindness by neglect, he became as he grew older more and more misanthropic, his silences more pointed, his self-control less sure; so that by the time his son Egbert was fourteen he could tolerate with but an ill grace the least interruption of his solitude. He divided his time between long solitary walks —periods, one surmises, of savage self-communion —and hours of browsing among books. Of super-

vising the work of the farmstead, to which he had characteristically given the name of Fipenny Hall, he made only the thinnest pretence, preferring to entrust the fortunes of his family to a salaried bailiff, who, at the instance of Elizabeth, hard put to it to make ends meet, was in due time succeeded by the eldest son, William the younger. Willy, as he was called, had reached his twenty-second year when this burden—the task of wresting a livelihood for his own and his landlord's family out of a hundred or so exhausted acres—fell upon his shoulders. The boy had— so strong was tradition, so thorough his mother's training of him—a powerful respect for his father, as indeed had all the children, so that Mr Pandervil, in part by virtue of his office, in part by virtue of his being a gentleman and a reputed scholar, became an autocrat in spite of himself. His wife never forgot that in marrying her he had mingled fire with her humble clay, and his withdrawal from life, which was in effect though not in intention supercilious, served to keep her in mind of that social disparity between them which he himself had all but forgotten. Had he known her to have been still conscious of her inferiority, still gratefully aware of her unworthiness, he would have been deeply touched and hurt, for beneath the thick blankets of his egoism he was sensitive enough. One can imagine his weak eyes widening, his hands being raised in a gesture of compassionate deprecation: 'My poor dear girl!' But no such revelation ever occurred; for these two had never bared their

minds to each other. Their intimacy was superficial. There was the habit of affection between them, no longer on his part a conscious habit; they shared the same bed and were parents of the same children; for the rest, she served the vegetables and he the meat, and their marriage was a happy one. Indeed, at fifty, Elizabeth Pandervil accounted herself something of a darling of fortune. Sarah, the firstborn, who had shared the domestic drudgery for fifteen out of her twenty-four years, was an increasing comfort to her mother; Willy, the eldest son, was a hard worker; Algernon, besides helping on the farm, brought in a few shillings a week by running errands for the local doctor; and Egbert, now fourteen, gave occasional delicious hints of taking after his wonderful father. The four other girls, from Flisher (Felicia), aged twelve, to Mildred the little four-year-old, with Martha and Jane intervening to demonstrate that morality was not extinct, gave very little trouble, always contriving to wear each other's clothes or suffer their mumps, their measles, their scarlet fever, simultaneously and in the same bed. Yes, Mrs Pandervil had been lucky in her children; two thirds of their number (a magnificent proportion) had survived; and of the others only Frederick, who by now would have been twenty, remained to haunt her with a wistfulness that was the faint echo of a tumultuous grief. Ebenezer, Lucy, and Arthur—it had been pitiful to see them die, but scarcely less pitiful perhaps to see them live, so small and feeble did they seem; and when she

remembered these three consecutive disasters she caught herself venturing, half-conscious of impiety, to thank God that now, as she had good reason to believe, her child-bearing days were over. For Arthur's death had frightened as well as saddened her. The christening curate had arrived in the nick of time—two minutes later, with the magic words unsaid, that tiny body, puking and convulsive, would have been snatched to everlasting fire. Even Elizabeth, an unimaginative woman, could not forbear to shudder when she thought of that. Fortunately she had little time for unproductive thought of any kind, and at this period nothing occurred to disturb her busy serenity except the occasional, the terrible, the dramatic collapse of her husband's control of his perpetually quivering nerves.

One such collapse it was that precipitated the boy Egbert into the beginning of maturity. He stood dreaming in the sun-spangled farmyard, a bill-hook held absent-mindedly in his hand, his eyes dazzled with the gleam of sleek cobblestones, his nostrils filled with the familiar smell of pigs and cow manure and damp decaying straw. Just returned from the fields, where he had been helping his elder brother trim hedges, he now leaned luxuriously against a stable wall filling his mind with vague bright fancies. From the warm darkness of the stable came the sound of Willy's movements and mutterings, and the pawing of the responsive nag grateful for his ministrations; there was a drowsy hum of life in the air, though summer

was not yet come; and the afternoon sunlight beat almost pulsatingly upon his bare head. He was at peace, consciously and lazily enjoying the delicious sensation of fatigue ebbing from his limbs, of sleepiness invading his brain. Nor did it greatly irk him to hear Fang, the old black and white sheep dog, suddenly break into infuriated protest and run into the road. A cart was passing, and Fang was indignant; his years had not taught him to suffer such insolence patiently. Egg turned a languid eye towards the cart as it came across his line of vision; grinned a greeting to Sam Reddick; and lapsed again into dream, hardly noticing that Fang's barking went on and on, cutting the languid afternoon into a hundred sharp fragments of noise. But he did notice that an upper window of the house was suddenly flung open. It was the window at the end of the passage leading from his father's study, that room into which, when the world could no longer be borne with dignity, Mr Pandervil retired.

'I can't stand it any more.'

Mr Pandervil uttered these words clearly and quietly but in a voice that trembled, almost as though they had been a prayer. His face was deathly pale, his eyes were blazing; Egg saw the corners of his mouth twitching as with pain.

Egg ran forward. 'Is anything the matter, sir?'

'That dog,' began Mr Pandervil . . . and for a moment could say no more. 'Where's Willy?' he presently gasped. Willy had already emerged from the stable and was moving towards

his brother. 'Ah, Willy!' said Mr Pandervil, in a tone of ice. 'That dog's noise. Every time anything passes in the road. I can't bear it. Take the animal away, Willy, do you hear? Take it away and shoot it. Yes, at once, my boy. Fetch your gun and shoot the damned thing.'

In Mr Pandervil's world, to command was to be obeyed. He withdrew, and shut the window. Egg felt as though he had received a heavy blow on the back of the head. He removed his fascinated stare from the now blank window and looked upon a world that had become, in a few seconds, crazy and horrible. The sunlight, formerly a splendour, was now a sickly grin. The silence, after that thin cold precise voice had finished speaking, was dreadful, full of nameless menace.

'Willy,' said Egg to his brother. 'Do you think the Guv'nor's mad?'

For answer Willy scratched his head thoughtfully. His plump red face wore a puzzled look. But his hesitation, if he experienced any, endured but for an instant. Thought was an activity beyond his scope. He could eat and sleep, love and hate, fight and dumbly suffer and (as he proved two years later at Inkerman) die in his country's quarrel without understanding a word of it; but to these talents had not been added the power of thought. Best of all he could obey; and now, with the merest frown puckering his forehead, he turned into the house to obey his father. Egg, following close at his brother's heels, could scarcely believe what he saw; could scarcely believe, being

unversed in the world's unchanging ways, that dull wits would faithfully carry out what the sick brain had ordered. Above all things in the world he wanted to save poor Fang, and in his heart there burst into flame an old smouldering fury against his brother. 'Don't be such a great oaf, Willy!' he called. But Willy, though affronted by this unseemly speech from a junior, took down without a word the gun that hung across the kitchen fireplace; loaded it; and went out into the yard again.

Egg ran to his mother. 'Stop him, Mother. He's gone out to shoot old Fang.'

'Shoot Fang?' echoed Willy's mother. 'Deary me, now what would he do that for?'

'Stop him, Mother. Oh, do stop him!' Seeing her look of bewilderment he patiently explained: 'Father told him to do it, but he couldn't have meant it really.'

'Father said shoot Fang?'

'Yes, but . . . '

'Now, don't you be a narty boy,' said Mrs Pandervil, mildly reproving. 'No doubt your father has his good reasons. And of *course* Willy must do as he says! The very idea!'

A kind of terror mingled with the childish rage that burned in the boy's eyes and cheeks. A sense of impotence came upon him—a sense that the world might at any moment go mad and he be powerless to stop it. As he stumbled into the sunshine he could hear the voice of Willy—'Come along Fang! Good dog! Good dog!'—wheedling the animal to its doom. That fellow, that

lump of docility, had cunning enough to pat and stroke the victim, and coax him out of the yard. They were already moving away, Fang leaping joyously about his master, encouraged by the sight of the gun to believe that rabbiting was afoot. Egg, staring in dumb misery, watched the two disappear behind the barn. The paralysis of despair had descended on him. He guessed that the meadow called Flinders was to be the scene of slaughter, because the intervening hill, Stally Pitch, would help to deaden the sound of the gun. But why, he asked himself, why this shyness about a mere gunshot, no unusual event on a farm? Would it injure his wretched father to know that his edict was obeyed? The boy, racked now by indecision, whether to attempt a rescue by violence or to wait here till Willy returned alone, could not for the space of several minutes find heart to do anything whatever beyond stand at the edge of the sunlight and stare dismally at his own dark thoughts. Hate blazed in his heart, blazed darkly and dreadfully like ancient night wild with black winds and lit by neither moon nor star. He imagined himself with a gun in his hand and slaying—with a cold anger not unlike his father's—all the stupid people in the world. Violent impulses, running riot in him, spent themselves harmlessly against the wall of his temperamental indecision. In fact he could do nothing, nothing at all, it seemed; but in fancy he saw himself knee-deep in murder—killing Willy, killing Father, killing everything that wantonly threatened the wretched innocent Fang. And

Mother as well? From that last insanity his imagination recoiled, and tears blurred his eyes. A cloud lifted from his brain; his limbs were released; he set off in pursuit of his brother.

The farmlands lay still and drowsy in a trance of afternoon sunlight, but in the boy's mind a storm was raging. He ran quickly across the yard and passed out of it by way of the east gate that gave on to a narrow cart-track bounded by high hedges, a cool cloister of shade from which, scarcely noticing that the blackthorn was already in leaf and the tardier hawthorn in bud, he presently emerged into a region—exquisitely unreal—of flowering fruit-trees, pink and white; and so to the twelve-acre field of young corn, and beyond to where in the shelter of a shallow valley a few score sheep were grazing. After the recent April rains the grass in the green valley was bright with urgent youth, its greenness starred with daisies and lit with buttercups. Cowslips sheltered under the hedges; and dandelions, like little rayed suns, blazed yellow from the ground. But to these rich colours, as to the quivering web of sound spun by the bees, and the lyrical passion of ascending skylarks, the boy's heart was dead. Upon him a shadow had fallen, and he hurried on with no thought to spare for anything except the benevolent lie he was preparing for his brother's ears.

As he climbed, panting, towards the green crest of Stally Pitch he heard the sound of gunshot and knew that he was too late. He slackened pace and presently came to a standstill, again in the grip of

a sick lethargy. But after a few blank moments he resumed his journey, not knowing why, and a dozen steps brought him within sight of where Willy stood, gun in hand, staring down at his handiwork. Young Egbert, still hating his brother, cherished now no murderous thoughts. The time for action was past; the stupid thing had happened; it was over and done with and irremediable, and he struggled to harden his heart against grief, trying to forget the calamity in contempt for its cause.

His brother, by the time Egg reached him, had begun digging the dog's grave. The two exchanged no greeting, but after watching the work in silence for a while Egg inquired in a dull cold tone: 'Where did you get that spade from?'

'Eh?' Willy turned a surprised face to the questioner.

'Where did you get that spade from?'

'The spade? It was lying about up yonder. So I brought it along with me.'

Egg smiled devilishly. 'Think of everything, you do.'

Willy resumed his digging. 'One thing. He was getting old,' he muttered after a few minutes.

'By the way,' said Egg airily, 'what will Algy have to say about it when he comes back from Doctor's? Give you a putty medal, shouldn't wonder, for being so clever.' Obscurely he felt that he mustn't for one moment stop hating and hurting Willy; for in that hatred lay his only salvation from tears. He was bitter and dry-eyed. He stared at the dead dog with no visible emotion.

After a pause he returned to the attack. 'How will you round the sheep up now, eh? Perhaps you'll learn to bark yourself? It's all you're fit for, if you ask me.'

'Eh?' said Willy.

From his blank look Egg could see that Willy had not taken in a word he had said. And he saw, with a shock of something more than surprise, that there were tears in the stupid fellow's eyes. Egg hastened to remind himself that he hated Willy. They had been friends, no doubt, his brother and the dog; and he hadn't much liked the dirty job. But Egg wouldn't be sorry for him. Great oaf, he should have thought of that before! What's the good of being sorry now? Egg's mind slipped back ten minutes, and, carried forward by the impetus of his former plan, he suddenly and without volition blurted out: 'Father's sent me to say he's changed his mind, Willy. Mother spoke up for Fang, and he says not to shoot Fang after all.' He himself was surprised to hear these words.

But still his brother seemed not to have been listening. 'What you say, Egg?'

Egg shrugged his shoulders. 'Oh, doesn't matter.'

'Well, now you're here,' said Willy, a trifle truculently, 'you can lend a hand lifting 'un.' The grave was ready, and but little remained to be done. Only a dog after all, Egg told himself. Without word or sign of feeling he stepped forward to do as he was asked.

As though a drop of blood had been spilt upon

it, the gold in the western sky was gradually reddening, and the April sun, tempering the sharp sword of his light, glowed now within an ace of the world's rim. On their way back to the house Willy remarked: 'Late for tea, I fancy. Must be nigh on ha' pas' six, by the look of it yonder.' He nodded towards the sun. Egg made no sign of having heard, being absorbed in the task of industriously hating his companion; and presently Willy, as if afraid of silence, spoke again. 'Tell you one thing, Egg. He didn't suffer, old Fang didn't.' Egg strode on, a pace or two ahead, staring fixedly at the ground. 'Twas over in no time,' said Willy. 'When I . . . when I'd done it, I just sorta patted him, and he licked my hand, you know, same as ever, and rolled over dead. And . . . well, that was all.'

'Oh, shut your row, can't you!' growled Egg, turning quickly round.

The brothers confronted each other with every appearance of anger. Then suddenly Egg realized with astonishment that Willy was blubbering and shouting at him: 'You bloody young fool, why coont you stay outa harm's way! I dint make you come, did I! Come out to Flinders a-purpose, I did, so's to keep you out of it. And here's you sneering and sulking and . . . ' The voice broke past control, and Willy, ashamed of his emotion, turned his back on Egg, hunched up his shoulders, and, snatching a large red handkerchief from his pocket, blew his nose with trumpeting emphasis.

Egg was bewildered, aghast. Life had become,

in an instant, an inconceivably complicated and mysterious affair; and hating, an almost impossibly difficult task. He was disconcerted, even angry, to find his purpose weakening; disconcerted by this revelation in Willy of something that inconveniently evoked in himself an old affection and a new feeling akin to what he had once or twice felt for the smallest of his sisters, four-year-old Mildred. Blubbering donkey, he thought, or tried to think. But it was no use: the iron of his resolution, the cold steel of his contempt, had melted; and he caught himself wishing that Willy would box his ears, as an elder brother should, and so resolve this problem of what to do next. In default of any such happy termination of the situation Egg stared at the horizon and contrived to whistle a bar or two of *The British Grenadiers*. He sauntered on for a few paces, and when he heard Willy's footsteps overtaking him called back over his shoulder, 'Mother's sure to save us a bit of something, late or not, eh?' And so, without further incident beyond an occasional sniff from Willy, the brothers walked home together, shy of each other, afraid to speak much, and still more afraid lest their glances should meet and confess the newborn love that vibrated between them.

The kitchens, back and front, were populous with Pandervil children. In what they called the back-kitchen, Flisher, Egg's junior by two years, was helping Sarah, his senior by ten, to wash up the crocks and cutlery of the last meal, with the little girls, ten-year-old Martha and six-year-old Jane,

getting in the way by alternately playing shops and clamouring to be taken on as extra hands. Shoo'd away from the sink these juniors started a rival washing-up industry and became very busy cleansing imaginary plates in imaginary water. The game was not a success; for Jane was a child imitative to the point of stubbornness, and Martha was too weakly compliant. If Martha did the washing, so then must Jane; and if Martha, yielding up the invisible dishcloth, began the pantomime of wiping the things her sister had dipped in water, that ritual became at once infinitely attractive to the younger child. Flisher, from the Olympus of her real sink, intervened from time to time, urging upon Jane that this business of washing-up tea-things involved two operations, and that a double washing or a double wiping was profitless. But Jane would not listen to these reasonable counsels; and Flisher, a fair freckled prematurely domesticated child, anxious beyond her years, grew cross with her, and infected Martha with this crossness, so that the back-kitchen became noisy with the broad vowels and the sing-song intonation of Mershire so marked in the female Pandervils. Sarah, plump like her mother and pretty as twenty years earlier her mother had been, cast an occasional glance behind her and said mildly, 'Leave 'er be, Flisher. Why, what a to-do, to be sure!'—an appeal that passed quite unnoticed.

Between this scene of strife and the kitchen proper, where Mrs Pandervil presided over her sons' delayed tea, the door was wide open; and the

three males carried on such manly conversation as seemed necessary, discussing crops and prices and the news from the war-front, to the accompaniment of clattering dishes and feminine altercation. Algernon, loyal to his brothers, had refused to eat until their return, and was now expiating this neglect of his appetite by the consumption, heroic in its scope, of bread and dripping and suet pudding swilled down by half a gallon of weak tea. Willy and Egg were more taciturn than usual, a little unresponsive to the traveller's tales brought home by Algernon, whose casual labour for Doctor Wilson sometimes took him as far as six miles distant into regions seldom visited by his brothers and never ('The very idea!') by his mother and sisters. All three were conscious of a certain constraint in the air, though only two of them, the youngest and the eldest, knew its cause; and all, with no overt sign, turned their hearts towards Mrs Pandervil, the one utterly right and unchanging fact in this world of flux, this maelstrom of Early Victorian modernity. She sat at the head of the table, a huge brown teapot in front of her, and, without ceasing to savour the rich joy of this present moment, chewed the placid cud of her memories. This was her hour, and this her teapot: an hour she never forewent: a teapot whose use she never delegated, even to Sarah, no matter what domestic crisis should be darkening the horizon. The humblest of women, asking only (and not in vain) that she should be made perpetual use of by her husband and children, she was at such moments happily and rosily

enthroned. Her cheeks retained something of the roundness and the wholesome colour that had once made her, in the eyes of young William Pandervil, irresistible; and time, removing the bloom of youth, had summed up her history in delicate hieroglyphics, a significant beautiful tracery of fine lines. She was not an old woman, and a certain native insensibility had prevented her being too intimately hurt by life's assaults; her youth persisted, and was visible, beneath the thin veneer of advanced middle age; but her everlasting benevolence, tempered only by the rigours of the current code, made her a venerable figure. Slow-minded, uninformed, she yet by habitual kindness showed herself wise. Being as sensitive to emotional atmospheres as she was proof against ideas, she detected at once the undercurrent flowing between Willy and Egg, and she was aware, no less, of Algernon's growing perplexity. It was he who led the conversation and he who sustained it.

'They frosts last week will have snipped all the fruit blossom, eh Willy?'

'Shouldn't wonder,' admitted Willy.

'Bad thing,' said Algernon. 'Wrong time o' year for frosts, ain't it, mother? 'Tis them as cripples it. They frosts, I mean.' He seemed determined that his remarks should not be disregarded for lack of being understood.

Willy was still apathetic. 'I dare say.'

'No fruit at all this year,' said Algernon, after a silence. 'Eh, Willy?'

'Eh?' returned Willy.

'I were saying, no fruit at all this year, what with frosts so late and all. Frosts at the end of April—tint fair! No fruit at all this year. No stone fruit anyhow, by the look of things.'

Egg could see that Algernon was now making a deliberate assault on the ramparts of silence built up by his brothers. Having guessed that something was being concealed from him he was ill disposed to leave them in peace. Moreover he was naturally a talkative lad and he had been away from home all day seeing the world, for the most part through the window of Doctor Wilson's dispensary. Adolescence—for Algernon was two years deeper in that adventure than the nimbler-minded Egbert—had not tied his tongue; nor had it quickened his inventive wit. He had introduced the subject of frosts and fruit, and of that conjunction of ideas an endless series of small irritating remarks would be born unless his sociable appetite were speedily appeased.

'Well,' said Algernon, eyeing his elder brother narrowly, 'if we don't get any fruit this year. . . .'

Egg cried out, almost in his father's voice: 'Oh shut up about fruit, Algy! Can't you think of something else to say?'

Sixteen and fourteen glared at each other. 'Don't you be so cheeky, young 'un!'

Mrs Pandervil intervened: 'Now don't quarrel, boys. Egg mustn't shout, and Algy mustn't worry poor Willy. We're not in a chattering mood this evening.'

Algernon stared. 'Somebody dead?' he inquired with veiled insolence.

'Yes. Fang's dead.'

It was Egg who spoke, and as he uttered the words their significance bit deeply into his mind, so that he became angry again and was put to the emotional necessity of hating someone. This unplacated hunger, like a hawk in mid air, hovered over his thoughts seeking a convenient victim.

'What, old Fang dead?' The shock sobered Algernon. He looked blankly from face to face.

With every repetition of these words, 'Fang dead', Egg's anger burned the more fiercely. 'Yes,' he said. 'Fang's dead. He's been shot dead. We've just buried 'un, Willy and me. So now you know!'

'Who shot him?' demanded Algernon.

Egg noticed that the clatter in the back-kitchen had abruptly ceased. The girls were crowded in the doorway, listening. He paused before answering. Everyone looked at him. Even Willy looked at him. Egg said: 'We shot him ourselves. Willy and me shot him, if you want to know. By order'—and here the hawk, seeing its chance, swooped swiftly down—'by order,' added Egg deliberately, 'of *that beast Father*.' Ah yes, that tasted good.

He was perhaps a little flattered, and more than a little awed, by the sensation that his blasphemy created. For blasphemy it was, no less; the most outrageous utterance that had ever reached his mother's ears. The girls fluttered and trembled;

Flisher failed to repress an hysterical giggle that changed the next instant to weeping; and Mrs Pandervil sat staring with horror in her eyes as though she looked on madness itself. She opened her mouth, from which nothing issued at first but a little gasp. Then she pushed back her chair from the table and slowly rose, wringing her hands and saying in a tense whisper: 'You wicked, wicked boy!' White-faced, biting his lip, Egg tried to meet unconcernedly her grieved accusing eyes. Little wonder she was shaken, seeing him so bold in sin; for she cannot but have feared that this son of hers, in whom she had sometimes seemed to see a trace of the father, was utterly corrupt of heart and destined for a bad end. But perhaps that evil vista was shut out of her imagination by the immediate necessity of punishing the sinner. 'You bad wicked boy,' she repeated, 'to speak so of your father! I can't believe it !I can't!'

Egg felt a touch on his elbow. Willy was bending towards him. 'Better say you're sorry, Egg.'

Algernon, overhearing the advice, thought to help matters by casting his vote. 'Yes, Egg, say you're sorry! Do!' And Egg's purpose, which had been wavering towards a qualified repentance, stiffened again and would neither bend nor break.

'Yes, I'm sorry,' he heard himself say. And, with a harsh little laugh: 'I'm sorry Father's a beast. But it's not my fault.'

Mrs Pandervil, with a mournful cry, sank down into her chair. 'The Lord forgive me, I've borne a son without grace. He hates his own father!'

Egg, the centre of this storm, stared at his stricken mother, heard Flisher's sobs, was conscious of his brothers' bewildered eyes upon him. He felt himself to be alone in a hostile world, and with no histrionic sense such as might have solaced a more egoistical Satan, he was forlorn indeed. Forlorn and near to tears; but against that surrender he struggled bitterly, for at last, at last, he had realized whom he must hate, whom he must blame. Without question his father was a beast; there could be no going back on that.

The unhappy woman spoke again, sadly but with decision: 'Willy, my boy, you must whip your brother.'

Willy shrugged his shoulders, and after a pause he remarked with unwonted spirit: 'Seems I'm to have all the dirty work to-day. Can't I have a rest same's other folk?'

Being now in control of herself Mrs Pandervil answered quietly: 'Willy, are you going to obey your mother?'

Willy grunted. 'Oh well, we must do as you say, Mother. Egg knows that 'swell as me.' He got slowly out of his chair.

'No!' said Egg. He had suddenly remembered that revelation on the way down Stally Pitch; he stood again in the sunshine and watched Willy's face crumple up, comically, heartrendingly, like a a baby's; at all costs Willy must be protected from this further ordeal. 'No, Mother. Willy needn't whip me. Let Father whip me. Let me go to Father now and tell him that he's . . . and tell

him what I said.' An astonished silence followed this speech. 'I'll tell him, Mother,' said Egg eagerly. 'Honour bright I will!'

They held their breath, these Pandervil children, till their mother should announce her decision. At last she said: 'Very well. Likely it is best so.'

Egg stood up. His heart beat wildly, his face was pale, and his lips were stiffly set. Watched by all eyes he walked self-consciously to the door, and there, unable to bear the silence a moment longer, he remarked, with his fingers on the door-handle: 'He's in the study, I suppose?' Before it occurred to anyone to answer the superfluous question, he was gone.

He tapped on the study door. Hearing no response he tapped again. He was now on the verge of tears, and this delay was unendurable. What he had to do must be done quickly or it could not be done at all. His courage was at the ebb, and he was afflicted by a sense of the sheer silliness of this anticlimax. He tapped a third time, and still hearing nothing opened the door softly.

William Pandervil's study was a country foreign and frightening yet in some unfathomable way attractive to Egg. It was the only room in the house that contained books, and it contained little else. Books lined three of the four walls, from the floor to within two feet of the ceiling; and the smell of their leather hung palpable in the air, an intimidating smell that started a long train of forgotten associations in Egg's nether consciousness. In the presence of so much learning Egg felt him-

self to be a bumpkin, a clodhopper; at such times he shared his mother's sense of inferiority. He was dimly aware that in these books were recorded the thoughts and discoveries of dead or distant men, but if he felt a moment's curiosity it died at once in face of the assumption that such things were not for him. At school he had acquired a rudimentary knowledge of reading, writing, and arithmetic, together with a list, necessarily incomplete, of the kings and capes of England. He knew that Alfred had burnt some cakes, that Charles the First had been beheaded, and that—some time between these two equally important events—Queen Elizabeth had sunk the Spanish Armada. He knew that there were rivers in Europe called the Danube, the Rhine, the Seine, and the Volga—the last because it was the same as a word used by the schoolmaster in rebuking a mannerless boy. He knew, further, that Queen Mary had had 'Calais' written on her heart, and that to describe this queen as 'bloody' was not swearing. He knew: 'Not Angles but angels!' and 'Take away that empty bauble!'; and he knew that the English Channel divides England from France, and that his good fortune in having been born on the right side of that same Channel made him the equal of any three Froggies. These titbits had given him no appetite for the larger meal of education; and his schooling, what there was of it, being now at an end, he had turned with a certain eagerness to more significant matters. The habits of birds interested him, and the queer

look in the eyes of the farm animals set him speculating curiously. He often wondered what it would feel like to be something or somebody else —a cow or a tree or the elderly vicar of his parish; but if ever such a question concerning his father presented itself he shrank from it hastily, the mystery being too dark and dreadful. In the fields he was happy, giving no thought to books or to the dull difficult alien gentility they stood for; but here in his father's study he was suddenly ashamed of his ignorance, thinking himself despised for it. This shame for one instant distracted him from the memory of his crime and its impending punishment. He was further distracted by the queerness of his father's attitude.

Pandervil senior was leaning forward in his chair, his thin vague face sunk between hunched shoulders and resting in the cup of two twitching hands. Staring at a spot on the carpet, and seeing nothing, he was a man lost, utterly remote. He did not look up at his son's entry.

Egg remembered his errand. He remembered, too, that Fang had been shot by command of this man. He blurted out: 'I called you a beast, sir.'

Mr Pandervil emerged from his reverie. He gazed at his visitor with puzzled, patient, weary eyes.

'Please?' said Mr Pandervil, using one of the rare locutions he retained of his native Guernsey speech.

'Downstairs,' stammered Egg, 'I said you

were a beast, sir. Mother's sent me to be whipped.'

Mr Pandervil seemed more than ever puzzled. 'You said I was a beast. But why?' His manner, mild and courteous, had not changed.

'I said you were a beast,' repeated Egg stubbornly. He fancied that this clever educated stranger was sneering at him. Only so could his mildness be accounted for. The boy felt inconceivably clumsy and stupid. Yes, he was stupid; he had made a fool of himself, and everybody despised him for it, everybody was laughing at him, most of all his father. But, stupid or not, he was not going to be tricked into an argument about whys and wherefores.

Mr Pandervil repeated his question: 'But why? Why did you call me a beast?'

A look of mulish and cunning obstinacy disfigured Egg's face; he himself was aware of it, and he fancied it to be his best defence. 'I've come to be punished,' he insisted. To be punished, not to be sneered at and made game of by the man who had read all those books. 'Shall I bend over?' For besides the knowledge acquired at school he had learned the inevitable consequences of such wickedness as his. He had committed a grave offence in the sight of God and man. He knew himself to be a wicked boy, and he knew that if he were struck several times across the buttocks with a stick or switch he would be miraculously made good again, the soreness behind redeeming him from the corruption within.

Whether or not he understood the theory of the matter, of the practice there could be no doubt. If you put your hand in the fire your fingers were burnt; if you called your father a beast, you were beaten. This, in Egg's world, was a plain natural law. And so, impatient to get the ceremony finished, he said: 'Shall I bend over?'

He bent over. Mr Pandervil picked up a long ruler from his table and bestowed five sharp cuts upon the seat of regeneration. 'That'll do, my lad.'

By Egg's standards the punishment was light, even trivial. Even to him it was apparent that there was no conviction behind the castigation; and now, released from his obsession, he was at liberty to wonder what ailed his father.

'And now,' said Mr Pandervil, 'if you will kindly satisfy my curiosity, *why* did you call me a beast?'

Remembering the reason all too bitterly, Egg answered, flushing: 'Because you had Fang shot. Our dog Fang. Because I hated you.'

Mr Pandervil smiled. It was a smile that betokened neither mirth nor bitterness—a queer heartrending smile that suddenly, for no reason at all, filled Egg's eyes with the tears he had so stubbornly held in check. Looking on his father, as for the first time, he saw him as a suffering creature, mortal like Fang, simple like Willy, blundering and bewildered like himself. A sob gathered in the boy's throat, and tears began streaming down his hot cheeks. . . .

He returned red-eyed to the kitchen, where Algernon, noticing his state, came to him with brotherly sympathy, saying, with an arm flung about the youngster's shoulder: 'Bit of a stinger, was it, Eggie? Never mind, lad. 'Tis over now.'

3

On Easter Day in each year Mr Pandervil went to church, because, as he explained to his wife, he took a peculiar interest in pagan festivals. Elizabeth, had she understood the remark, would have attached no importance to it; and in this she would have been right, for in fact Mr Pandervil was a firm believer in the Church of England, which he regarded as a necessary state department existing for the propagation of Christian mythology in the interests of good morals and good manners. Far though he was from being a family man, contriving when he could to forget that his family existed, he would have been troubled and indignant had the Pandervil womenfolk proved lax in church attendance. Fortunately no such disaster was possible with Elizabeth in command. She herself took turns with Sarah in cooking the Sunday mid-day dinner; one went to church, one stayed at home; but she saw to it that her younger daughters (except the baby), and as many of her sons as could be spared from the farm, never failed to set out in two decorous parties. Sarah in her Sunday bonnet and best crinoline, and linked

with her sisters hand to hand, had such a matronly air, and in years was so far beyond her companions that a stranger might have been excused for supposing her to be a young mother surrounded by her own children. In her left hand she carried the prayer-books; in her right she held the moist fingers of Martha's left; and at the other end of the line was Flisher, between whom and Martha little Jane was supported. Mildred, at four, was left behind, her good behaviour being still a matter more for conjecture than for hope. At a decent distance behind the girls, followed two of their three brothers, sheepish, self-conscious, hands scrubbed and faces polished, and looking—in their ill-fitting, sober, Sabbath garments—pathetically gawky and anxious to please.

To Egg, though he would perhaps rather have been out of doors, this necessary church-going was not an unmitigated misfortune. He did not, indeed, take pleasure in listening to the shrill, brisk, gabbled chanting of Hebrew psalms; to prayers nasally intoned; and to chapters from the Bible read with a dreary unction that invited nothing but open-mouthed, empty-minded reverence; and he did not like that incessant alternation of kneeling and sitting, sitting and standing, which we know to be peculiarly pleasing to the Holy Trinity. But, for the sermon, of which he never consciously heard more than a dozen words, he was vaguely grateful, because it gave him a chance to sit still and lose himself in a rich daydream compounded of the glowing colours of stained

glass, the holy smell of the stove in winter and of warm varnish in summer, and the rise and fall of the Vicar's drawling voice, together with all manner of odd thoughts and random recollections, associated for the most part with other Sunday mornings. From the windows, especially, he never failed to derive enjoyment—an enjoyment sensuous in the main but not wholly so, for the pictures, too, interested him, and he was able bit by bit to piece together a strange world—a stained-glass-window world—in which dwelt the saints and the patriarchs and the persons of the Trinity, all perpetually re-enacting their several parts in the brightly coloured drama which these windows depicted. This world he identified with the heaven into which, if he learned his catechism and did not too often call his father a beast, he would some day be translated. I have said that outside his father's study Egg gave no thought to books, being absorbed in the business of touching and tasting and intimately knowing the things of his own world. So, too, his dalliance with questions of religion was confined not merely within the limits of Sunday but within the time spent in the church itself. Religion, on its imaginative side, was for him a rather agreeable game, a many-coloured reverie to be resumed every week at the moment when the Vicar announced his text. One just slipped back into that other world, taking up the thread of fancy at the point where it had been unreluctantly dropped seven days ago, or indeed at any other point, for there were no rules in this

game. Into this confused luminous dream there sometimes floated—to be instantly invested with a new exotic quality—fragmentary memories of his life outside, his real life; pictures appeared out of nowhere; and sonorous cadences—'defend us in the same from all assaults of our enemies, that we, surely trusting in thy defence, may not fear the power of any adversary'—echoed like organ-music, rang like deep-toned bells, in his mind; for phrases from the very prayers that had been tedious to hear became rich and satisfying in recollection.

In due time another element was introduced into the Sunday morning game by Miss Jinny Randall, at whom both Willy and Egg used to stare under cover of religious exercises: the one for reasons that may be plausibly surmised, the other by force of a perplexing example. Jinny, it seemed to Egg, was by no means a remarkable young woman. She was neat and small and not bad-looking; but, unless poor Willy accounted darkness a virtue, dark hair, dark eyes, a cream-tinted skin, she was no whit superior to our Sarah, who, as everybody knew, was not an exciting person. Moreover, in spite of her ladylike ways and her school-teaching, in spite of the villagers' tribute, 'She *do* talk well-off!', everybody knew her to be the daughter of Randall's General Store, and most people, including Willy himself, had received at her hands bags of flour, packets of pepper, tins of mustard, bundles of firewood, popcorn, bullseyes, reels of cotton, canvas shoes, egg-cups, mop-heads,

string bags, pairs of braces, and other articles of domestic consumption. But three years ago she had been snatched up and educated by a rich relation, and was now come back, a real young lady, to teach pothooks and hangers and catechism to such of the village children as could be persuaded to listen to her. And yet, if one had only to look at Jinny Randall to see that she would never be a romantic figure, one had only, when she was near, to look at Willy Pandervil to know that for him she was romance itself. Her power over him was a phenomenon not to be ignored. Egg discovered it almost as soon as did the victim himself, and a day or two sooner than Jinny; and before long it was common knowledge in the Pandervil household: which means that it was known to everyone except Mildred the baby and William the sire. It was for Jinny Randall's sake that Willy blacked his boots and polished his gaiters with ridiculous frequency; it was for Jinny Randall that, two or three nights a week and twice on Sundays, he dipped his hairbrush into the ewer and laboured to make his hair lie flat and sleek on his head. Jinny Randall was indeed the beginning and the end of Willy. He was born again in the moment of seeing her enter the church after her long sojourn in the halls of culture, and it was some word of hers—Egg never knew quite what—that made the poor sheep finally break out of his pen.

Had Egg, on the night our history opens, been free to follow the train of thought set stirring by

his son Nicky's questions, he could scarcely have failed, gazing back across the years, to see in Jinny Randall the arbiter of his brother's destiny.

But no hint of cataclysm disturbed the serenity of their setting out together, Egg and Willy Pandervil, on that warm September morning in 1854. In the cart five fat lambs were crowded under a net. Willy held the reins; Egg sat at his side; and the ten white miles that lay between Keyborough and Mercester, or Merster, the nearest market town, slipped slowly, flowed meltingly, under their wheels. Egg's mood was easy and indolent. Although he did a share of the work, and had found nothing he liked better, he was at heart no farmer, and it was with no farmer's eye that he watched the fields of ripe corn flowing past. And in the market place at Mercester, having helped Willy to get the five Pandervil lambs into a pen, and listened while Willy conferred for a moment with Mr Fox, he at once allowed his mind to meander off, idly, in pursuit of private fancy, so that the sights and sounds and smells of the market—baa-ing, grunting, jostling beasts, yapping auctioneers, staring farmers—became the mere background for a confused sunlit dream that centred round the ridiculous figure of a goose. At his elbow stood a man dressed in a brown smock and armed with a stick, with which, from time to time, he prodded the back of a fat sow that lay taking her ease in the nearest pen. The sow grunted; the man grunted; the two sized each other up. 'All well at the Ridge?' said someone,

giving Egg's arm a friendly nip. 'Pretty middling good,' replied Egg. 'Ah,' said his friend vaguely, and passed on. The sow had now been goaded into rising: she was not quick, but she could take a hint. And, having achieved his purpose, the man in the brown smock passed on to fresh fields of adventure. The sow lay down again. But soon someone else began prodding at her, and she grunted again. Egg moved away, moved nearer to the goose, which, at five yards distance, had already claimed his attention. The goose was confined in a large wicker basket, alone. It was the only goose in the market, so far as Egg could see; and its solitariness lent colour to his fancy that it was the only one in the world, a unique creation, a highly exotic jest. How many times he had looked at a goose, thought Egg; yet here he was seeing the fantastic thing for the first time—recognizing as strange and individual what had always in the past seemed ordinary. Can it think? asked Egg. Is it looking at me, and does it think I'm funny too? But he did not pursue these inquiries, preferring to enjoy lazily the sensation of his discovery of this bird, staring as a child stares who sees something for the first time, and noting almost with excitement the bright raw beak punctured by nostrils, the violet boot-button eye rimmed with yellow piping, the stiff carriage of the neck, and the creature's almost pompous solemnity. With an air of dignified inquiry the goose presently thrust its beak through the wicker bars of its prison; and when Egg moved nearer,

and extended a cautious hand, the beak, opening wide, revealed the queerest interior—a tongue like a double-edged saw and a mouth with serrated roof.

'Had a talk with Jinny t'other night,' said Willy at his side.

'Did you?' murmured Egg. Well, come to that, Willy often did have a talk with Jinny, didn't he? The goose withdrew its beak into the basket. The auctioneer arrived and began saying in stern tones that this was the best goose he had ever seen.

'Yes, had a talk,' said Willy.

'Whad she say?' asked Egg.

Egg became aware that he and Willy were now hemmed in on every side by bidders and spectators. The bidding had begun. The poultry was being sold, and in particular the goose was being sold. It could not matter to Egg who bought the bird, or what price it fetched; yet he was conscious of giving only half his attention to Willy.

'Bit noisy here,' said Willy. 'Tell you 'nother time.'

Egg took him at his word and stopped listening to anything but the bidding. Yes, someone had bought the goose, together with certain other birds that were being sold with it. The auctioneer moved on a few paces, taking his congregation with him. And Willy began talking again.

'Yes, Jinny and I had a bit of a talk.'

'Bit of a talk, eh?' said Egg.

'We did so,' Willy assured him. 'Might almost say a bit of a tiff,' he added after a pause.

'A tiff?' echoed Egg. 'Oh, not a tiff surely?'

The goose's new owner was now taking possession of his property. A rich joke that bird was, and no mistake. The man untied the basket, thrust a hand in, and seized the goose cleverly by the legs and drew it out. It squawked and fluttered furiously. Some children stood by, watching the fun—four little boys, the eldest ten, the youngest perhaps five years old. They appeared to be happy children, but in a perfect world their noses would have been wiped. Goose tightly and easily held in one hand, with the other the purchaser fished out of his trousers-pocket a knife. With the help of his teeth he opened the knife. It looked a serviceable instrument for his purpose.

'She kind of dared me,' said Willy. He had been telling Egg about this bit of a tiff, but Egg was finding the story a difficult one to follow. And now Egg was conscious of a dull pain in his temples, where the knife had been stuck in . . . but that was nonsense, it was the goose's head that had been transfixed, not his. The goose hung upside down from a nail in the fence; black and crimson gobbets dripped from its amusing beak; its white wings beat passionately; and the four little boys pointed, and nudged each other, and giggled delightedly. When the convulsion ended, the glee faded from their eyes. If only the goose could have been brought to life again, thought Egg, they could have had their fun a second time. But that

was impossible. A pity, said Egg to himself; for he was hot and angry and a little sick; and he was secretly flustered, too, because he could not for the life of him get the drift of Willy's occasional remarks. Jinny had kind of dared Willy—that was all that Egg could make out. But he could see that the trouble, whatever it was, meant a lot to Willy, and feeling ashamed of his inattention he didn't care to ask questions that would let poor Willy see how little of the story had been listened to.

'Of course,' said Willy, 'there's no call to go telling 'em everything at home. But I wanted you to know, because you've got a head on your shoulders, moren some of us have. And—well—I wanted you to know.'

Yes, that was something that Egg did understand; for he would have felt the same about Willy, although Willy had not, as it happened, a very good head on his shoulders. Willy, despite the ten years between them, was nearer in sympathy to Egg than to Algernon; nearer, indeed, than Egg and Algernon were to each other. Egg was obscurely aware of this; and since he had never given it a moment's conscious thought it seemed a perfectly natural thing calling for no explanation.

Willy's remark amounted to an avowal of affection; so Egg asked quickly: 'What did the lambs fetch?'

Willy stared in surprise—'Didn't you hear the bidding?'

Egg confessed that he had been wool-gathering; and when Willy told him the lambs' price he made

an eager show of interest. Meanwhile the two brothers had turned into The Farmer's Rest and now sat down to the regulation market-day dinner. The place was already filled with men, and with the noise of men eating and talking together.

Willy nudged his brother. 'There he is—just the chap I want.'

Following his brother's indication, Egg saw that a stranger was come amongst them, a fellow conspicuously not of the farming fraternity who wore, for all the world as if it belonged to him, the bright scarlet uniform of the 17th Mershires. He was a very peacock among sparrows. With his gleaming buttons, his fine moustache, his loud voice and the proud chevrons of his rank, he looked like the illustration to a patriotic song. Before many minutes were passed everyone in the place was sharply aware of him. His brilliant presence struck so peremptory a note in that homespun company that was like a fire alarum, or the clangour of a brass bell commanding silence. He was the magnet for all eyes. Mouths gaped admiration; voices were lowered; there was a great deal of nudging and whispering and winking; and the serving-wenches went scarlet with a sense of the occasion. The only living thing in the room that seemed unconscious of the Sergeant was the Sergeant himself. Knife and fork held perpendicularly in the two fists planted one each side of his plate, he sat magnificently at ease, waiting his turn as though he had been an ordinary man. Proud, having such a presence, he could not help being:

to call him proud is but to call him human. But haughty he was not; nor domineering. If he knew that his long mustard moustachios were the finest in Mershire, he did not flaunt the knowledge; if he knew himself physically a match for any three of these sleepy agriculturalists, he was not puffed up on that account. His manners were loud and civil. He said: 'I'll thank you for the salt, sir . . . Greatly obliged, sir!' He was respectfully gay with the girls, rising to receive his plate of meat from the eager hands of one of them with a gallantry that almost translated boiled beef and carrots into a nosegay for his buttonhole; and twinkling kindly with his prominent russet-coloured eyes at the lass who brought him his tankard of ale. For a while, thereafter, he ministered faithfully to his appetite, quite unaware, you could have sworn, that all the world was covertly, and with an air of high expectation, watching for what he would do next. If he had been swallowing swords or munching glass they could not have found in him a more fascinating spectacle. And presently their vigilance was rewarded. He leaned towards his nearest neighbour and remarked: 'They're a savage lot, sir, them Roosians!' Flattered and embarrassed by the honour of being taken into the Army's confidence the man addressed could do no more than nod gravely, as if to say that he had already suspected as much. '*But*,' added the Sergeant, raising his voice, 'our lads are a match for them, never fear!' In tribute to that sentiment all civilian tongues ceased to wag; and the

Sergeant, continuing in a loud deliberate voice, yet with an air so heavy with secret meaning as to be almost conspiratorial, remarked to the world at large: 'Though I'm not saying they couldn't do with an 'elping 'and, gentlemen! No, no; I'm not saying that!' And then, having got on good terms with his audience, the dazzling enigmatic creature hastily filled his mouth with suet pudding and munched fiercely for three silent minutes. He swallowed his pudding to the last glistening crumb of fat; took a long draught of ale; and, having sucked the froth off his moustache, he approached the root of the matter. 'I don't mind telling you gentlemen,' he said, screwing up his eyes like a tipster, 'I don't mind telling you gentlemen that there's a few more wanted for the Calvary.' He rose to his feet and signed to the girl for his bill; paid it with pomp; and marched with clanking spurs to the door. There he halted, and then—on the heel of the right foot, on the ball of the left foot, and bringing the left smartly into the right—he performed an exemplary Right Turn.

'Gentlemen, it's a chance in a lifetime! Who's for the Calvary! Who's for swinging his leg over an 'orse and riding to glory!' The gentlemen sat spellbound. Undoubtedly the fellow had a way with him. And as they stared at him his manner subtly changed. A whimsical smile creased his face; the stiffness of his pose relaxed. 'Come, boys!' he said cajolingly, affectionately. And at once these farmers felt like boys and saw this gallant scarlet-coated fellow as the genial father of

them all, a man like themselves, fond of his pint and his joke, and craftier only in the ways of war. A moment before, they had been admiring the man's performance: now, with two words, he had touched their hearts. 'Come, boys! There's fighting and there's fun, there's dooty and there's danger! Who's for the Queen and the Queen's shilling?'

A chair scraped the floor. A young man stepped forward. 'I'm with you, Sergeant!'

'And you've the figure for it, lad!' said the Sergeant. 'You'll look a fair treat on an 'orse. A regular stachoo!' And with that he repeated his formula: 'Who's for the Queen and the Queen's shilling?'

Egg felt a hand on his shoulder. 'Goo'bye, Eggie lad!'

He looked up, dazedly, into the face of Willy. One queer look passed between them, and then, before Egg understood his meaning or intention, Willy was having his hand shaken by the Sergeant.

'Willy! Willy! Don't be a gert fool!'

Egg's shout was the signal for uproar. The spell was broken and the enchanted tongues unloosed. But when the boy would have rushed forward to hold his brother back by main force, a friendly hand gripped him. 'Steady, lad! Steady!'

'Let me go, damn you! Can't you see what's happening? It's Willy, my brother. . . . '

But the Sergeant had already hustled his men away, and when at last Egg succeeded in forcing a passage through the excited chattering group that

remained, he reached the door just in time to see them vanish from sight at a bend in the street—that little huzza-ing crowd, by now mostly children and women, in whose midst strode Willy Pandervil, arm-in-arm with scarlet Death.

4

The Pandervil acres—which is to say the acres for which the Pandervils had paid rent for thirty years—consisted of some seven or eight fields, more grass than arable, distributed on and around a spur of the Mercester Hills know as Saffron Ridge. It had always been called the Ridge Farm, and Mr Pandervil's fancy for writing *Fipenny Hall* at the head of his letter-paper did not for an instant threaten to break down the local custom. If Mr Pandervil was a gentleman that liked his joke, let him have it and enjoy it in private, especially a foreign joke such as a body couldn't be expected to understand. Two centuries old, the house nestled snugly in what might be called the lap of Saffron Hill; for the shape of the hillside roughly suggested a woman asleep in a half-sitting half-recumbent attitude, with her head thrown back; her knees supported the farmhouse, and her ample bosom sheltered it from the north-east winds. The south and the west windows—such as they were—commanded a view of green valleys and of the lesser hill—little more than a bump—called Stally Pitch, beyond which lay Flinders. By climbing to the top of the Ridge the Pandervils

could see, while still in their own fields, almost the whole of the great undulating plain of Mershire lying at their feet, a pattern of green and brown and silver. If in fact they seldom took the trouble to do so, it was perhaps because they had neither time nor thought to spare for the singular charm and interest of their situation, all being busy with more immediate affairs.

The weight of these affairs, in so far as the farm contributed to them, fell now, in Willy's absence, on Algernon and Egg, though their father too, waking somewhat belatedly to a sense of danger, began to take an active part in the farm's administration. Algernon resented being dragged away from the service of Dr Wilson; to Egg it seemed that his brother feared to lose that cosmopolitan glamour which daily intercourse with the outside world had imparted to him. For many weeks he did his farm-work grudgingly, and under Egg's direction; but one day he seized the reins of government and asserted his seniority. 'To-morrow, my lad,' said Algernon, 'we'll finish that bit of ploughing back there.' Had his appetite for authority been satisfied with such a statement of the obvious, all would have been well; but before long Algernon began to get ideas about farming, and then, for all his good intentions, he was a dangerous fellow. He appalled Egg one day by proposing that Flinders, the best grazing land for twenty miles round, should be ploughed and sown with wheat. 'And where shall we graze the sheep then?' asked Egg. Algernon, with a mulish look,

replied that the sheep could graze where they pleased, adding: 'Back up the hill. They'll be out of the draught there. You and your precious sheep!' 'Where should we 'a been last year without sheep?' demanded Egg, 'with corn harvest ruined as it was? Too busy washing bottles to notice, you were! And there's this about my precious sheep—they're sheep, not goats. Maybe you didn't know the difference. There's not enough grass on the scrubby hillside to keep a rabbit healthy, let alone a few score sheep!' Encounters of this kind made for strained relations between the brothers, for, though neither of them was disposed to cherish anger, they fell into the habit of disagreement and so were perpetually wrangling. It made matters no better that Mr Pandervil, when intervention was necessary, always decided on the conservative policy; for this strengthening of Egg's hand made Algernon, smarting with humiliation, fall back on the fiction that he was a man in advance of his time, a pioneer whom nobody was quick enough to appreciate; and such a notion did not help to make him more lovable. Yet Algernon, when his ill-defined itch of ambition ceased for a while to trouble him, showed himself pathetically eager not to be shut out of Egg's confidence. Perhaps his sense of having been always excluded from the unspoken affection subsisting between Egg and Willy had set up in his mind a conflict of which his stubbornness, his singular self-assertiveness, were but symptoms. Egg, who as he grew older became quick in divination of such disorders,

half-guessed the truth about Algernon and began to make allowances for him. He did, indeed, everything for Algernon except the one thing that Algernon unconsciously—or perhaps consciously, if we but knew—demanded of him. He did not, because he could not, accept him as a substitute for the absent Willy. And on the day he learned that Willy had been killed at the front——

It was a sharp winter's morning. Algernon, with the evil message on his tongue, found Egg in the orchard tending a sick cow.

'Bad news, Eggie,' said Algernon.

Egg looked up idly. 'Well?'

'Bad news about our Willy,' said Algernon, beginning to flush and stammer, poor fellow, as though he felt that he was to blame for everything.

Egg's glance wavered, and he moved a step or two away from the cow. All the physical details of the world about him became shockingly vivid and strident, leaping one by one into startling prominence, then rushing together in his consciousness with the effect of sudden assault. He looked at nothing, but sights crowded importunately upon him—the bare orchard trees rigid and black, their limbs twisted into gestures of pain; the cloud of his own breath, solid like marble, tangible, cold; and that monstrous unsignifying shape, that bright pattern of colour, the mutely suffering cow. He noticed, too, with a kind of sick curiosity, that the frozen turf was soft, elastic, spongy, and that it crackled under his feet with the sound of torn

satin. All these things, these objects and these perceptions, were blindingly, deafeningly, prodigiously real and urgent; they offered to a mind eager for distraction from its enemy a thousand minute and curious details each one of which, accorded its share of attention, would serve to postpone by one degree the dreadful, the inevitable moment—the moment when he must turn from this bright feverish little drama and look into the face of the fear that stood at his elbow, watching, leering, biding its time. When at last, after an instant crammed with experience, it became imperative that Algernon should be answered, Egg said quickly, his words following Algernon's with no appreciable delay:

'Willy's wounded.'

He had the air—he was conscious of having it, he was conscious of everything in the universe—of offering this proposition, not as a question, but as a statement which he challenged Algernon to deny. And he knew himself to be gazing at Algernon in a fashion half-accusing, half-defiant, as if daring him to pretend that any news could be worse than that. In Algernon's answering look he saw that his brother's eyes were tortured with a compassion of which he, Egg, was the object. Algernon took a step towards him, mouth agape, hands pleadingly extended.

'Willy's wounded,' repeated Egg woodenly.

'Nay, my dear . . . ' stammered Algernon. 'Not wounded, Willy isn't. Not wounded, boy. He's . . . killed, poor butty!' He tried to add: 'Don't

hate me for it, Eggie!' His voice broke on the words.

Algernon's heart, in all its misery and loneliness, was naked to Egg's sight, but the mind of Egg was filled with a vision in which Algernon had no part. Algernon was heartbroken for Egg's sake, and Egg could feel only a dull resentment that the fellow valued Willy so little as to have emotion to spare on a merely vicarious sorrow. Tearlessly, coldly, he met his brother's mournful, timid, solicitous scrutiny; but indeed he was now but vaguely aware of it. The objective world had ceased to be vivid. The orchard trees, the cow, Algernon himself—these were flat figures on the backcloth of a new series of images, visible and audible, that slid across the stage of his mind. A battlefield, sleek and glossy and full of bright bad colours like the picture of Waterloo in the kitchen, yet horrible with a horror of its own, a nightmare region. Snorting horses, thundering hoofs, the roar and smoke of cannonry, swords flashing, martial music; yes, drums beating, trumpets sounding, everything right and proper, except that above it all Egg could hear the voice of a man hideously screaming, and that in the foreground he could see human faces, scattered limbs, trodden into the mud. He saw, too, a goose hanging upside down, blood dripping from its beak, with children gazing and giggling; young Mr Fox, the auctioneer's clerk, briskly licking the point of his pencil; Jinny Randall in church, singing psalms (seen with a sidelong glance) or reciting prayers (seen covertly between

half-closed fingers); the Recruiting Sergeant munching his meat, a vein palpitating in his temple and his eyes growing big as blood alleys; Jinny Randall again—that fool bitch, said Egg bitterly. And always there was Willy himself: Willy digging a dog's grave; Willy stamping cakes of mud from his boots; Willy in the hayfield tipping back his head to drink cider from a black horn cup; Willy leaning on a rake astride a loaded wagon; and Willy, red-coated, mutilated, misshapen, staring glassily at the moon, alone with his brother corpses. No, said Egg's mind. *No.* NO. But on the face confronting him—for Algernon couldn't for ever be ignored—the truth was clearly written, not to be argued or blustered away. And in that face, in those eyes already brimmed with compassion, dawned a new anxiety.

'Steady, lad, steady!' Algernon's hands were still imploring his. 'Don't take it that way!'

Egg stepped back a pace, mutely declining to be touched. 'Willy's wounded,' he said, for the third time. And, after a moment's staring silence, he turned his back on Algernon and walked slowly, woodenly away. . . .

And not for some weeks did Algernon dare to mention Willy again, although, as Egg couldn't but be aware, there was nothing he wanted more than to talk the matter out. For a while, intimidated by Egg's savage silent grief, he kept a strict guard on his speech, so that—in the consciousness of both brothers—whenever they were together it was as if the ghost of Willy stood between them.

Yet finally, when what had to be said was said, the words fell naturally enough on ears that had forgotten to expect them.

''Twas just such another day as this,' said Algernon, 'when Willy came home in his regimentals. You 'member, Egg?'

'Ay.'

'Sort of far away, he was, like a stranger,' said Algernon.

Egg gave no sign of being astonished. But astonished he was. It was a shock to him to discover that Algernon had perceived Willy's absent-mindedness. Willy had listened and talked as of old; had eaten with his accustomed gestures; and had slipped back, after perhaps an hour of stiffness in his gait, into the slow swinging stride of one who has spent his life crossing ploughed fields. To all chaff he replied with his old grin; and once, when sharp-eyed Flisher had spoken the name of Jinny Randall, he had blushed. Yet in spite of these familiar manifestations Egg had been conscious that Willy was absent from them; that bull-necked Sergeant, or his like, had done something to change Willy, or rather to drive the real Willy into hiding; and while others admired and clapped their hands and said, 'You do look a smart one!' Egg held his peace, hating the red coat of servitude. He hated it still more in retrospect, believing that it had in part obscured his last sight of Willy. His mind set moving by what Algernon had said, what part, he asked himself, had Jinny played during that brief leave? The question lingered with him

for some days, and at last, as if in answer to it, Jinny herself appeared. They met down the road, a few yards from the house: he in his working clothes, she in bonnet and crinoline.

'Arfnoon, Miss Randall,' said Egg. And was for passing on; but Jinny lingered, and he could not quite bring himself to snub her.

'Oh, Egg, I wanted to speak to you.'

He waited for her to continue. He was ill at ease, for he was still nursing anger against her, the more resolutely because she had not died of grief. Moreover her dress made the occasion a formal one; she was no longer the familiar Jinny Randall, of Randall's Stores, nor yet the Miss Randall he and Willy had watched in church: she was a call-paying lady.

'I wanted . . . ' faltered Jinny again, 'to speak to you.'

'Mother's up at the house,' suggested Egg. For it was impossible that Jinny should want him.

'Yes, I'm paying a call on Mrs Pandervil. But . . . but you first, because . . .' He noticed that her usually sallow face was flushed, and that there were dark rings under her dark eyes. She was, to his view, more definitely a woman than she had ever been before; he was aware of some force in her which, had it not faintly repelled, might have fascinated him; but being a few months short of eighteen against Jinny's mature twenty-three, he was at a loss to understand why Willy had loved her. 'Because,' stumbled Jinny. 'because Willy said . . .'

At the mention of that name Egg tried to harden his heart against her. 'Never mind,' said he shortly. 'Mother's up at the house if you'm wanting her.'

The rebuff made Jinny widen her eyes in wonder. 'But won't you do something for me?' Her tone was humble, almost pleading. 'Willy said you would. He thought a terrible lot of you, Willy did. It was always Egg this and Egg that,' These last words carried a hint of weariness, even a hint of resentment; and Egg, seeing her to have been once jealous of him and feeling her to be no longer so, was conscious that in himself, too, anger had suddenly died. That Willy had loved this woman was still matter for astonishment, but that she had loved Willy brought her within range of Egg's understanding. He could not, however, find any answer for her.

'I was to come to you in any trouble,' Jinny breathlessly added. 'That was one of the very last things he said to me.'

'Are you in trouble now?'

She nodded. 'And I want you to take me to your mother, Egg, please. And stay in the room with us.'

'Why?' asked Egg, with a look as unsympathetic as his voice.

A blush began flooding her face; she put up her hands to hide it. Egg, thinking she was about to weep, at once repented of his harshness.

'Won't you tell me why?' he said mildly.

She faced him again, saying: 'It's just a whim,

Egg. I don't want to be alone with your mother. I'm nervous of her, but if you're there I shan't mind so much, because you and Willy understood one another.'

'Mother won't eat you,' said Egg.

'Will you do this for me?' she asked.

He shrugged his shoulders. 'Oh, all right. But if Mother asks me to go out of the room I shall have to, shan't I?' He was, indeed, acutely uncomfortable at the thought of overhearing a conversation the purport of which could already be guessed. But to refuse her request, in the face of all that had been said, would have made him more uncomfortable still. In his heart he said: Why am I so soft about things?

The visitor was received in what Mrs Pandervil called her parlour, a sunless intimidating room that was so seldom used as to have entirely escaped the beneficent infection of humanity. Two stuffed birds in glass cases stood one each side of the mantelpiece, with a clock, a pair of tall vases, and two glass lustres coming between them. These objects were reflected in the large overmantel mirror, but it might be urged in its defence that the reflection was not accurate. The walls with their dark blue pattern of which the recurring theme was a bunch of grapes twining round the stalk of a peony, were plentifully sprinkled with family records—a greatly enlarged photograph of Mr Pandervil at twenty-five, another of Mrs Pandervil nursing her first baby, silhouette portraits of Mrs Pandervil's parents, and a sampler done by Sarah Pandervil at

the age of eleven and a half—but these human evidences singularly failed to alleviate the spiritual deadness of the room.

'Well, Jinny, how are you, my dear, and all at home? You'll stay to a cup of tea, won't you?' Seeing that Egg hovered in the doorway Mrs Pandervil added, with a smile: 'Be off with you, my boy. Jinny's come to talk to me. We don't want young men about us, do we Jinny?'

For answer, catching an imploring look from the girl, Egg diffidently stepped into the room and shut the door behind him. 'She asked me to stay, mama. Made quite a point of it, she did. Do you mind?'

Jinny said quickly: 'Yes, Mrs Pandervil. I asked Egg to stay. Please let him. It's about Willy that I've come, and Willy said . . .'

Bright-eyed, the two women faced each other; the one alert, suspicious; the other already afraid and faltering. Egg, staring almost agape, was aware that the relationship between them had in an instant changed. In Jinny's face the flame of her secret mounted; the light in his mother's eyes was like the glint of steel. That one word, 'Willy', had made division where formerly there had been on his mother's part nothing but goodwill, tinctured, perhaps, with curiosity; and, on Jinny's, nothing but timid hope. Now, for an instant, they were at primitive enmity: jealous, implacable, ripe for murder.

'Ah!' sighed Mrs Pandervil. With a satisfaction in which was a hint of cruelty—Egg's stare

became incredulous—she watched the girl's confusion. 'I think we'll sit down, maybe.' They sank into chairs opposite each other. Egg remained standing by the door, forgotten by both of them.

'Well, Jinny Randall,' said Mrs Pandervil, 'what have you to say about my Willy?'

The girl raised her eyes from the ground. 'He was *my* Willy too, Mrs. Pandervil. That's what I came to tell you.'

Mrs Pandervil answered nothing. Her lips were set in a hard line, her gaze was unrelenting. She waited to hear more, yet contrived to let it appear that whatever more was said could not greatly interest her.

'He was mine, Mrs Pandervil,' Jinny repeated. And after a pause she added, in a breathless whisper: 'And I'm near my time.'

'Ah!' said Mrs Pandervil again. 'So that's it!' She turned in her chair. 'Egbert, this is no place for you.'

Egg, standing his ground, made no answer. That he should leave Jinny to the mercy of this strange woman, this mother he had never seen before, was out of the question. He was in the presence of something alien, monstrous, half-insane—something to which he could not even try to give a name; and he felt as perhaps a man may feel when for the first time he hears the sound of turning thumbscrews and creaking rack. Hatred and terror surged in the silent room; pain quivered into life but uttered no cry. To his secret sense, sword met sword, and the treacherous dagger flashed and fell;

yet still unmoving, still without words, the antagonists gazed at each other.

Presently the older woman got out of her chair, stepped rigidly a pace forward, and began speaking in low angry tones, while Jinny sat staring and flaming at the ground, twisting and untwisting her fingers. Egg—so oddly did the scene strike him—hardly listened to the words that were said. If these two women had been made of wood, they and their gestures could not have seemed to him more queer and stiff and unlifelike. He was bewildered by the release in his mother of a personality utterly strange to him. He had seen her angry; he had seen her sternly judicial; but he had never before been allowed to lose his sense of a fundamental kindness in her, and the experience was so shocking as to falsify everything that was said, everything that happened. The spate of denunciation flowed past him, so that he did not consciously hear it; but, after it was past, chance phrases returned to him to mingle with his circling thoughts. The whole story of Willy, so far as he knew it, repeated itself in his mind in a series of little bright pictures; and behind these pictures moved the drama, as Egg's fancy conceived it, of Willy's love story, beginning with that critical Sunday morning when a translated Jinny Randall walked up the aisle of the church, and ending with the secret passionate farewells of lovers who were never to meet again. Between that first scene and this last there came numerous homely memories that for Egg were more significant: of Willy, red-

faced and eager-eyed, earnestly polishing his boots and gaiters before setting out to pay his respects to Jinny; of Willy plastering down his hair with water in front of the bedroom mirror; of one evening especially when Willy swore wild oaths—all but wept—because at the last moment his braces broke; and of Willy plucking at one's sleeve in church, generously ready, naively eager, to share the ecstasy of seeing Jinny first appear. These visions flashed by, these echoes sounded, and—— Aren't you ashamed of yourself, miss! Enticing my poor boy. Sly tricks. Sent him to his death. No better than a whore, as God's my judge . . . Such fragments as these he found recently written on his mind, and coming upon the vilest of them he suddenly—minutes after the words had been spoken—broke out with a passionate cry:

'Mother! Mother!'

Mrs Pandervil turned on him quickly—in anger, maybe, but still more in surprise. Her eyes pierced a question at him.

'Mother, you've said enough. You've said too much. I think . . . I think you've lost your senses.'

'Hold your tongue, child! How dare you speak to your mother so!'

Egg heard himself shouting: 'I'm not a child and I won't hold my tongue. Willy promised I'd stand by her, and I will. She's not what you say.' He moved half-blindly towards the girl and held out a hand to her. 'Come along. I'll take you back home.'

Staring dazedly up at him, Jinny answered: 'I can't go home. I daren't. They've turned me out.' She rose slowly to her feet. 'But of course I can't stay here either.'

'No, that you can't,' declared Mrs Pandervil. 'The very idea!'

Egg detected a subtle change in his mother's voice, but he could not spare eyes for her, being vigilant to see any new sign on the face of Jinny. And, indeed, at that very moment, a spasm of pain twisted the girl's lips, blanched her cheeks, made her dark eloquent eyes stare wildly like those of a tortured animal. She swayed, and, stretching out a hand to steady herself, fell into Egg's arms.

'She's fainted,' gasped the boy.

Mrs Pandervil opened the door. 'We must carry her upstairs, to Flisher's room. Ah, the disgrace of it! The wickedness!'

'I'm not fainted,' murmured Jinny. 'I can walk. Let me go.'

She leaned heavily on Egg's arm; Mrs Pandervil supported her on the other side. 'Poor deary, the pains are on her. Steady now, and we'll put you to bed.'

'Let me carry her, Mother. She's no weight.'

He lifted the girl from the ground, and with her arms clinging round his neck he felt Willy's strength flowing in his veins and rippling in his muscles. The burden was a heavy one, but he supported it with ease, his mind fixed on the task yet able to afford hospitality still to all manner of random thoughts. His step was confident, care-

ful; his heart joyous. Jinny, her head sinking on his shoulder, moaned in pain; but he mounted the stairs exultantly, conscious of his mother hovering in the rear, and half-conscious of the fancy that it was Willy himself he was carrying in his arms. When, after a long journey, a crowded little interval of time, he at last laid down his precious burden on the bed, he heard the voice of Mrs Pandervil, a mother newly restored to him, murmuring: 'There, there, my lamb! We've got you safe! Mother's got you!' And he realized with a pang that indeed something living, something that was marvellously and mysteriously Willy, was struggling to be born into the world of light.

CHAPTER THE SECOND

MONICA

I

During all that winter he had been from time to time aware of the little prickings of a new revelation, of something struggling—as the child had struggled in Jinny's womb—to be born in his consciousness; and when orchards flowered again, and hedges became warm with the first scent of hawthorn, the world of sense seemed burdened for him with a secret message whose purport he could not as yet surmise. Jinny's child, although it bore traces of being Willy's too, ceased, soon after it was born, to hold any strong interest for him. It was a baby like other babies. It lacked teeth; it lacked hair; it was very small; and it was called, inevitably, Billy. Egg liked the creature well enough and would have done anything in reason for its comfort and safety, but he was aware of it as an organism rather than as an individual. He took pleasure, however, in observing Jinny's maternal infatuation; and was satisfied that there would be no more talk of turning Jinny out. Mrs Pandervil—not maliciously, perhaps not willingly, but rather as a matter of plain duty—had advertised her sense of the danger of exposing her daughters to such moral corruption as Jinny stood for. But

the balance of opinion was against her; even Sarah, plain and precise and in imminent danger of becoming an old maid, begged her not to mention the matter again, lest it should reach the ears of the young mother herself. In fact, against all the canons of decency and justice, the sinner was made much of, and the child of sin waxed fat. The Pandervil girls competed jealously for its favour; Mr Pandervil, on one occasion, made an indulgent clucking noise at it; and even Algernon, now a fervent farmer, had his sentimental moments. Egg alone, Egg who had first championed its cause, appeared but mildly interested in the child. He already, in a sense, was settling down into the routine of hard healthy drudgery, eating, sleeping, working. Everything that happened, happened; he had almost ceased to wonder why; and he had, for the time being, quite ceased to bother his head with those queer speculations about other people's lives, other creatures' lives, which had once occupied his private thoughts. He had become self-absorbed, troubled by a sense of something beyond, something just out of reach, to which he was perhaps moving. Anonymous expectancy agitated his few reflective moments.

Crossing the farmyard one crisp May morning, his arm hooked under the handle of a bucket half full of bran mash, his eyes staring at the sunlit cobblestones, Egg Pandervil moved unconsciously into his new life. A shadow fell across his path; a voice greeted him, cool and clear as running water; and he looked up to see a young girl stand-

ing before him—dark, cool, and neither tall nor short, the plump oval of her face shadowed by a sunbonnet. Yes, she was visibly a girl, an ordinary mortal young woman; young and dark, younger than himself; young and dark and seductively soft, like a warm summer night spent lying in long grass naked and abandoned, drowsily aware of the rise and fall of earth's ample bosom. He was bewildered as by unexpected music poignantly sweet, so that for a moment he could do nothing but stand and stare at her, stupid with wonder.

She, as if to explain her presence, held out for his inspection a milk-can. She repeated the request he had been too deeply shaken to notice. 'May I have an extra pint, please, for Mrs Wrenn?'

Egg put down his bucket with a clang. 'Pint of milk, did you say?'

'Please. It's for the Vicarage. I'm their niece.'

'Oh, yes. Certainly. A pint of milk.' He did not offer to take the milk-can from her. He stood quite still, not knowing what to do, and not caring, being empty of thought. He wanted nothing; he was content. But presently, after a perceptible hiatus, it came upon him, piercing his armour of bliss, that something had to be done. Already he had realized the propriety of not staring too boldly into the kingdom of heaven, and had glanced, with guilty abruptness, at his boots. And now there was this other matter—a pint of milk. 'You did say a pint, didn't you?'

'Yes, a pint. We've had our usual quart, but Auntie sent me to get a pint more. Ought I to call

at the house for it? I expect I ought. How stupid of me!'

'Oh, no!' He took the milk-can from her hand. 'I'll . . . I'll fetch it for you. Won't you . . . ' He nearly said: 'Won't you sit down?' And he blushed for the absurdity, as though she had read the words in his mind. Seeing his confusion she could not but smile faintly and lower her eyes. The universe burst into song.

In the dairy, which was cool and dim after the brightness outside, he found his sister Flisher. He handed the milk-can to her, for it was understood that, in the dairy, men were definitely subordinate not merely to their mother but even to their sister, if it were Sarah or Flisher. 'Someone from the Vicarage wants a pint of milk.'

'Who is it?' asked Flisher, as she filled the can.

'Someone from the Vicarage,' said Egg.

'Yes, I know, silly. But *who?*'

'How should I know? A girl. Vicar's niece or something.'

'That'll be the Monica Wrenn they were telling of,' said Flisher. 'I'll take it to her. Where is she?'

Egg was already at the dairy door, with a pint of milk for which he would if necessary have paid with an equal quantity of his life's-blood. 'She's waiting outside. I've got to go that way.'

He stepped quickly out of the dairy, in terror lest the apparition called Monica Wrenn should have vanished, leaving the earth desolated. But

no, she was still there, incredibly actual. She stood gazing intently at distance, her chin resting on a long white forefinger; but at Egg's approach her attitude stiffened with a hint of delicious awkwardness.

'Thank you very much. And Auntie says will you please put it to the account.'

Egg, with great difficulty, blurted out the speech his mind had been busy preparing for him. It was neither a long nor a bold speech; yet he stammered in its delivery and went very red in the face, and almost forgot his words. 'Did you . . . I mean, did you come through the orchard . . . the orchard way?'

'Oh, yes,' she said. And, marvellously, her voice rose on the second word, instead of falling as that of a Mershire girl would have done. It rose in a heavenly flight; rested for an instant; and then vanished—a melody in two notes, delicately and excitingly inconclusive, so that Egg, filled with longing to find some way of making her say 'Oh, yes' again, had hardly wit enough to understand her when she added: 'It's the only way, isn't it, except by the road? . . . Good morning!'

And not until she was gone, leaving tumult behind her, did he interpret her remark as an ironical comment on his question. Since she had approached the farmhouse through the yard she could have come only by way of the orchard. He stood convicted of making idle conversation; and perhaps, he thought, she already guessed what secret compulsion it was that had put him to that trouble.

This alarming and delicious possibility inspired him with the notion of leaving his bucket where it stood and boldly following her . . .

He overtook her in the orchard, where indeed she lingered, as she could not but do; for in that entranced and softly breathing world, that momentary embodiment of an ideal loveliness, nothing was easier than to lose all sense of affairs in contemplation of the incredible blossom, the cool live grass sprinkled with sundrops, and the delicate clear pattern of song spun by birds and bees. Egg's heart was beating noisily and his mind was busy trying to invent plausible excuses for this pursuit of her; so that he plunged into the orchard with no thought for its beauty, awkward, eager, self-conscious, and troubled by a hundred doubts and fears. But when he saw her standing quietly reflective under a tree, his agony diminished; and when he saw that she was aware of him and yet did not take flight, he with a sense of infinite release forgot himself. He approached her slowly, easily, drawing life from the glance of her intent dark eyes; and, as he moved forward, the orchard grew up around him, glowed into life in his consciousness as though it were but an emanation of herself. He saw her indeed as the meaning of the orchard, and its sufficient cause; saw her as the meaning and epitome of all the loveliness he had ever seen, and of all the greater loveliness he had sometimes—and with a pang like that of home-sickness—dimly desired. She was, quite simply, everything; she had destroyed his world and created a new one in its

place. His belief in her perfection, his sense of her as the fulfilment of life, was profound and irrational and unassailable; he was lost, lost in heaven; he was dead and buried and risen again, seeing the eternal light and walking the fields of blessedness. But this moment could not endure for ever; sooner or later, speech must ensue, and with speech would come back all the old hesitancies and humiliations. He was afraid to speak, but the fear did but heighten his bliss by setting upon it the seal of impermanence. He approached within three feet of her, saying not a word; and they exchanged a long wondering look, in which love was not so much confessed as innocently assumed and marvelled at. It was as if looking in each other's eyes they saw not themselves, not each other, but a vision of so great beauty that they stood appalled, speechless. For Egg, this moment and the moment after—the moment of shy first love, when becoming again conscious of each other they fell into confusion—were indeed real life, the purest rapture that he was ever to know; for this his heart had waited and hungered, and in this scale—unconsciously—all alien joys were to be weighed and found wanting. Yet what was happening between them these two hardly knew; they were glad or bewildered, their minds lagging behind their intuitions. No specific thought of love had as yet come to disturb the peace in which they were united. But he noticed in her eyes, the next instant, a hint of trouble, the shadow of sweet pain; and in that same pulse of time he was aware of the sword of

division flashing between them. They had been made one for an eternal moment; and all the song and heartache and pulsing radiance of spring were darkness and death compared with that moment. But now they were back again, he and she, in time and circumstance, in a world where young men and maidens could not stand for ever wordless, on so short an acquaintance, taking their heart's fill from each other's eyes. Their mutual scrutiny had been, in fact, not long but deep; infinite beatitude crammed into a few seconds of the clock. And now, compelled to say something, Egg said: 'May I carry the milk for you?' And he took the can from her. She turned to continue on her way, and he walked, with downcast eyes and wildly beating heart, at her side. Daisies were in the grass, and buttercups; which, with the bright grass itself, made music in his heart. There was suddenly too much beauty in the world; it snatched his breath away; it assaulted his strength, so that his knees trembled and he found himself unable to speak even when words offered themselves to his dry lips. The vivid orchard that stabbed him with bright colours—this he tried resolutely to fend away. It hurt him to remember that the minutes were flowing undeviatingly into the past, and that in a little while there would be nothing left of this experience but memory; yet that, too, was an exciting and mysterious thought, within which, if only one could deeply penetrate it, reality itself, the very stuff and secret of life, lies hidden. Egg, unaware of the problem, was nevertheless

aware of an excitement induced by its proximity; and so, though the half of him protested like a child, he felt it to be exquisitely fitting that she should turn to him at the orchard's edge and say: 'You mustn't come any further.'

'Why?' he answered.

She half-smiled. 'Because I say so. Give me the milk, please.'

The ecstasy of being commanded by her! The ecstasy of obeying her and hurting himself by that obedience! 'Will you come again some day?'

'I might,' she said, and in her lovely exciting singsong she added: 'Or I mightn't.'

'To the orchard, I mean. Will you?'

'Perhaps.' Her eyes shone with laughter, though her lips were demure. 'I'm not telling you.'

He was entranced; his spirit was crying out with happiness; but he didn't know what next to say or do. After an awkward pause he said: 'You're the Vicar's niece, didn't you say? You're . . . '

'Monica. Monica Wrenn.'

'I'm Egg Pandervil. Funny name, isn't it?'

She laughed. 'Is it funny? . . . Egg Pandervil. Yes, it's rather funny.' And then, without saying goodbye, she was gone.

She was gone, and the brightness of the morning, being so greatly diminished, became endurable. This was visibly, none the less, the first morning of creation, with the gold of the sun new-minted, and the air fresh and the grass green as never before. Everything in the world was aflame for him with

individuality. The process of lifting the gate open and feeling it swing back; the spring of the turf, elastic under his feet; the rustle of his own footsteps in long grass—each of these things possessed a quality and a joyous significance. And in the shelter of the hedge he found a cowslip, startling as a miracle.

He strode back to the yard, from which he had been absent for but a few minutes; and, taking up his bucket again, yielded its contents to the hungry pigs. Then, with an unexplained grin at Algernon, who happened across his path at that moment, he put a bridle on Daisy, the most vigorous of the mares, and led her out to the plough.

Egg addressed himself to his task with a queer exultation. The field was to lie fallow for this year; it was, as Algy had said, a stubborn bitch of a field, for it would grow nothing but quitch and charlock; but this morning Egg loved it. He admired Daisy too—her glossiness, her strength, the intelligent resignation in her oily brown eye; and as he made ready to cut the first furrow his glance noted appreciatively her straining leg-muscles and shaggy hocks. He gripped the handles of the plough and spoke a word to the mare. She moved forward; the revolving world kicked at the plough, making it rattle; but the next moment the shares bit deeply, and rich parings of earth began multiplying at the side of the lengthening furrow. The field rose in a gradual convex curve towards the steep hillside that mounted to Saffron Ridge; and Egg, as he crested its convexity, ploughing

with a glad passion such as he had never known before, was uplifted with a sense of conquest, fancying himself aware of the earth as a many coloured globe rotating under him. His energy seemed inexhaustible; and as the day grew hotter he felt its radiance pulsing in his veins. At noon, returning late for dinner, he found that Monica, the centre of his universe, was even here the centre of discussion, notwithstanding that Flisher was the only other member of the family who could claim to have seen her.

'Here's Egg,' cried Algernon. 'He'll tell you all about it. Now, Egg, speak up, lad! What's the wench like?'

'Do you mean the girl from the Vicarage?' asked Egg innocently. 'Oh, she's well enough.'

'What did she talk about?' demanded Flisher.

'Talk about?' Egg looked indignant. 'Didn't talk at all. Asked for a pint of milk. Nothing to talk about in a pint of milk.'

Jinny Randall intervened to ask: 'Is she good-looking?'

Egg shrugged his shoulders. 'All depends on what you call good-looking.' He listened no longer. Retiring into his private dream he lost touch with the conversation going on around him. But presently he emerged to hear Flisher say: 'Well, I had a peep at her.' Flisher gave him a sidelong spiteful glance. 'And she's awfully *fat*. That I *will* say.'

Egg stared at his sister in mild surprise, wonder-

ing of whom she could be speaking. But he did not trouble to ask. . . .

All that day, indeed, he lived and moved in a dream. He was excited, even feverish, but infinitely content with his excitement and his fever. Next morning, however, waking into this transfigured world, his agitation became painful. In the company of brothers and sisters he found that to behave normally, as though to-day were no different from other days, was a difficult and exhausting task. Surely this inward tumult must find some witness in his face! Surely his blessedness and his hunger, his past glory and his present clamorous need, must be evident to everybody! Below all the surface activity of his mind, which was kept busy with this necessity of being natural, was the thought that this very day, this very morning, he might see her again. He was afraid to look at that thought lest (though he didn't indeed reason it out) it should thereby become visible for all to read, audible for all to hear. Had she not confessed that she 'might' come to the orchard again? And though no hour had been named, was it possible to choose any other hour than the one made memorable yesterday? Egg, at once a more simple and a more complicated being than the dull fellow he had supplanted, was divided against himself, yet scarcely conscious of the division. In one part of him he knew that before morning had reached her zenith he would see Monica Wrenn again; in another he was in terror of being disappointed. He knew, but he instinctively pre-

tended to doubt; taking, quite unconsciously, a pleasure in the consequent alternation of torment and bliss. And at other moments, when fear became too sharp to be endured, he pretended to a greater degree of certainty than he possessed. He was in a state of exquisite incessant commotion; hope never hardened into assurance, and fear stopped just short of crazy despair. Never before had he been so excruciatingly alive.

By the time he reached—after much contriving subterfuge—the orchard, he was well-nigh worn out with emotion, and incredibly, for one instant, a sick weariness assailed him, so that he felt scarcely able to endure the excitement of opening the gate and walking in and putting an end to his suspense. It seemed to him in that dreadful moment that he could almost have brought himself to turn back and seek rest in oblivion. But only for a moment. Having swallowed, half-chokingly, the excitement that rose in his throat, he forced himself to enter the orchard at a brisk pace. And there, standing under the same tree as before, was Monica.

This moment of realization gave him, necessarily, a shock. For nearly twenty-four hours past she had been a dream to him, a symbol, a religion. Now she was actual, crudely actual; and though her beauty suffered no diminution, and though he had hungered to be near her, it was yet perhaps disconcerting to find her existing, located, solid. He noticed that she was slightly freckled, that her mouth was large; and being emotionally exhausted he could not at once be sure that these accidental

things, so far from being matter for regret, supplied the last pure drop in his cup of romance. But the next instant he knew this with all his heart, so that he rejoiced not merely in the idea of her but in the glorious bodily fact, and for the first time he entertained—shyly, rapturously—the possibility of touching her. An agitation too profound for happiness troubled his spirit; but presently—in perhaps ten seconds from the moment of meeting—the healing comfort of her presence flowed into him, filling him with peace

She was the first to speak. 'It's lovely this morning, isn't it?'

He nodded. 'As lovely as yesterday. Have you been here long?'

She answered with another question: 'Why did you come?'

'To find you,' he said promptly.

'To find *me* indeed!' She pretended indignation. 'You didn't know I'd be here. I didn't know myself until this morning.'

'*When* did you know?' asked Egg eagerly.

It was suddenly immensely important that he should know precisely at what hour her decision had been reached; but once again she parried with a question. 'Do you come to the orchard every morning?'

'Yes,' said Egg. He knew by her smile that she didn't believe him; and he knew that she interpreted his 'Yes' as a promise. 'Have you been reading your book out here?' he added.

He had only just consciously noticed that curious

portent, her book; and it explained something about her that had vaguely intimidated him. With a book in her hand she had almost the air of being on her way to or from church; for he had never before seen any book carried into the open air except a Prayer Book or a Bible. He guessed now that Monica's was a piece of secular literature, but her association with it started all his old disorders again. She was evidently a clever one, a reader of books; and he was nothing at all. No sooner had the question fallen from his lips than a feeling of unworthiness invaded him Sheepishly he turned his eyes away from her.

'Yes,' she said. 'I thought it would be a nice place to read in, the orchard. Are you going to prosecute me, Mr Pandervil, for trespassing?'

At that, for a moment, he felt sheerly wretched. But seeing the mischief in her eyes he took courage to say: 'That's what they call Father, not me. I'm Egg, you know.'

'Mr Egg then. Would you like to look at my book?'

He received the book awkwardly, nervously, as though it had been an infant that he was afraid of dropping. 'It looks very . . . very nice, I'm sure,' he said politely, turning the pages. His cheeks were scarlet. 'But I'm not clever enough for books, and that's a fact.'

'I'm not at all clever.' She spoke quickly, all her schoolgirlish levity gone in a flash. 'But I love reading. So would you. That's by Shakespeare. Sonnets or something.'

'Shakespeare? Oh, yes! It's him the Vicar sometimes talks of, isn't it? Your uncle, that is.'

'It's Uncle's book,' confessed the girl. 'I sort of stole it. Well, you know, took it. Of course I shall put it back. What I mean is that he doesn't know I've got it. He'd be cross if he did, I expect.'

Was it then a prohibited book? Egg was human enough to be stimulated by the suggestion into looking at the pages more attentively. 'It's printed funny, isn't it? A funny shape.'

'Is it? I don't think so.' Monica came to his side, puzzled. They studied the page together. After a pause she said, tentatively: 'It's poetry, you see.'

'Oh, poetry, of course!' That word, for Egg, was the summing up of all that was high and difficult and eccentric. 'Not in my line, poetry. Very nice, I 'm sure. But I can't understand it.'

He was about to close the book, but she placed a finger on the page and cried: 'There, that's a lovely one. Some of them are very hard, but anybody can understand that one.'

Wrinkling his brow, Egg read the sonnet through. It meant nothing to him. He read it again, silently forming the words with his lips, and he received a vaguely pleasant impression. A phrase in the fourth line, 'heavy Saturn', proved a stumbling block; for he read it as 'heavy Satan', and he felt that to mention Satan in the presence of a lady must surely amount to swearing.

'Do you like it?' asked Monica.

Being interested, Egg had forgotten his fear of her superior intelligence. 'Lemme read it once again,' he said.

This time he discovered, with something like excitement, that he was reading an avowal of love. And, by some miracle (or was it her pointing finger?) four lines of the fourteen leapt up at him and presented themselves as a poem separate, complete, and curiously personal. Their meaning was not immediately clear, but he felt them to be beautiful.

> *Nor did I wonder at the lily's white,*
> *Nor praise the deep vermilion in the rose;*
> *They were but sweet, but figures of delight,*
> *Drawn after you, you pattern of all those.*

He liked these lines so much that he blushed in admitting the fact. 'But what does "drawn after you" mean?' he asked, with the image of a cart and horse in his mind.

Monica explained: 'Drawn like pictures, don't you see? The way we had to copy things at school.'

'I see. And the pattern means . . . ?'

'That's what you have to copy.'

Egg read the sonnet a fourth time, paying special attention to this chosen passage; and he began to see that there was 'something in' poetry, in spite of its superficial queerness. And a plan of incredible daring formed in his mind. 'I see what it means,' he said, looking at Monica. 'It means you.'

She turned from him with downcast eyes, and

blushing. After a few minutes silence she said, 'I must go now.' And Egg was miserable all day thinking that his boldness had frightened her away from him for ever.

2

For seven more days Egg visited the orchard in search of her. She did not come. Nor did she come up to the house for milk. On Sunday he saw her distantly in church, but she seemed unaware of him. He made sure that he had irretrievably lost her.

Meanwhile the work of the farm went on, and Egg could not afford to be idle. Ten acres or so must be ploughed for root-planting—mangolds, turnips, swedes—or there would be no food for the cattle; there were sixty five sheep to be shorn; and, of the lambs, the 'singles' were now more than fat enough to be profitably sold, and many of the others were coming on smartly. Then before many weeks were past it would be time to be thinking about mowing and tedding and hauling the hay; Flisher would be busy with her cheese making, and three of the cows would be due to calve. Then, with the corn harvest and the fruit picking, another season would have come full circle. Altogether there was plenty of work to occupy Egg and Algernon, Higlett the shepherd, Dan Oaks the cowman, and Potty Oaks who was reputed to be Dan's son and to have been begotten shamefully, said the gossips, within the tables of consanguinity; plenty of work, this, leaving little

time, one might have supposed, for lovesick dreaming. Yet Egg, none the less, lived all that summer in a state of half-feverish, half-delightful melancholy, bearing on his twenty-year-old shoulders a burden of sorrow such as no one, he vowed, had ever borne before. With Algernon and Higlett—a small fellow, like a gipsy, with a squint eye and a mouth full of black teeth—he rounded up the ewes, penned them in hurdles, and sheared them in record time. Egg was a practised shearer—he had helped Willy in the old days. And Algernon, though he fussed and fumed a great deal, and talked incessantly, and sometimes drew blood, made a tolerable show. But compared with Higlett, with his fifty years' experience of sheep, the boys were the merest bunglers. With him it was as easy, he confessed, as shelling peas; and he was fond of boasting, with a leer, that the ewes, when he had finished with them, were as smooth and sleek as a girl's thigh, with never a scratch on them. At such remarks Algernon would giggle and look hot, and Egg would grunt.

Higlett, at sixty or so, was a crafty fellow with a taste for lascivious conversation; and Egg's impenetrable reserve piqued him. It had not escaped the notice, even of Algernon, that he was slightly intimidated by Egg, whose orders he obeyed with an alacrity unnatural in him. Dan Oaks was an utterly different type of man: heavily built, slow-minded, trustworthy, sanctimonious, a feudal serf. In his son Peter, nicknamed Potty for a reason sufficiently obvious, mental deficiency

was balanced by a kind of animal cunning; the poor lout, nearing thirty, was attached to his father by the bonds of servitude only; to Dan, not to the Pandervils, he was answerable; he had no official status in the hierarchy of farm labour, and received no pay, but an occasional thrashing from Dan served to keep him in a proper state of filial subordination, and he made himself useful in cleaning ditches and swilling out cowsheds. Of these three not one could write or read his own name.

During the third week in July the Pandervils and their two men set out with a scythe apiece to mow the rich green meadows of the higher valley. The day was warm and bright, true haymaking weather; and Egg, as he swung his scythe, felt the pride of young manhood flowing in every vein. At the end of each line he turned to look back with satisfaction upon the broad shining swaths; the smell of the grass was in his nostrils, and the brightness of summer for a moment filled his heart. The season, the ripe earth, his own strength of limb—all combined to reproach him for submitting so tamely, throughout these weeks, to the trivial tyranny of the fate that was separating him from Monica. He had lost count of the weeks that had passed since his last meeting with her in the orchard, but the glory of her now returned to him. There were a hundred reasons for despondency: his youth, his poverty, the difference in station—despite his father's gentility—between her and himself, she being so clearly a young lady,

so obviously the Vicar's niece. That he should ever win her, possess her, marry her, was a threefold miracle for which it would have been the merest folly to hope. Yet hope he did. More than that, he swore to himself passionately, stubbornly, that the impossible should be made to happen; and in that moment nothing seemed too great a task for his powers, if only, if only, she could be persuaded to love him. That thought brought him again to the verge of despair and made him tremble with a sense of his gross presumption. What was he that he should so dare? He was an unlettered boy, undistinguished, the working son of a farmer, with no personal gifts or attractions—how often he had peered hopelessly in the bedroom mirror!—and with no prospect of independence. He had nothing in the world that he could call his own except a few shillings of pocket-money which his mother, he suspected, could ill afford to spare him. He had nothing to offer Monica except his devotion. But with all his body responding to the sunlight it was impossible to be convinced by such reasoning. Hope became a flame in his heart, so that he was hardly surprised, when Flisher came into the field with jugs of hot tea, to see that she was accompanied by another girl. As the two came nearer, Egg observed calmly, holding his mad joy in check, that this other was Monica herself. The age of miracles was beginning.

Egg dropped his scythe and walked—with heart uplifted, with head downcast and face flushing—

towards the girls, who stood in the shelter of the hedge awaiting the haymakers. Not till he was standing at her side, too full of excitement to speak, too sharply aware of Flisher to want to speak, did Monica turn her large dark eyes towards him. For the briefest instant their glances met—his inquiring and (as he hoped) noncommittal, hers timid and veiled with shyness—and the very absence of words and incident gave to the meeting a warm sensation of intimacy. The merest faintest smile greeted him; yet he knew that their friendship, persisting through all these weeks of separation and silence, was now actively resumed. In some sense, he dared not wonder how, he and she were united, bound fast together in the enchantment of those orchard mornings. He saw her now, in his mind's eye, against a background of blossoming trees, herself the morning, the springtime, the intangible loveliness of life made tangible. But he was already bracing himself for the task of ordinary conversation, and reluctantly he heard Flisher remark brightly: 'This is Miss Wrenn, Egg. And she says I may call her Monica. We're going to be great friends.' A silly girlish speech, thought Egg; a babyish attempt to dispossess him of Monica, for Flisher knew well enough that they had met before. Having that glance to cherish, and being so deeply conscious of that bond, he could afford not to be jealous. Yet a small twinge bore witness to his resentment of Flisher's proprietary airs; her use of the sacred name offended him and made him a little sulky,

although it was possible—indeed it was more than possible—that a form of friendship between marvellous Monica and his very humdrum sister might work to his advantage. Had it not already led to this reunion?

'It's very hot,' said Monica.

Until now she had not spoken a word. Her presence, a grave brief glance, a faint smile on the lips—this had been all. But now he heard again, with the rapture of re-discovery, her voice, her deliciously 'different' speech. And now he was alive, awake, summoned out of the half-sleep in which he had existed for so long. This very day, the moment before her coming, he had exulted in his power to respond—with every drop of his young blood—to the joyous challenge of the sunlight; but that moment of exultation had been but a dim dream compared with the vital light of his present state. He was in heaven and he was lord of it, lord of everything except the adored one, the divinity whose voice—'It's very hot'—had translated him to this height, had invested him with kingship, had made of flesh and blood and bones and sinew a body of pure pulsating radiant energy, as of one raised from the dead. 'So this mortal shall put on immortality . . . ' But his thoughts were inarticulate, and he stammered a little in replying: 'Good haymaking weather. But we get very heavy dews, evenings, more's the pity.'

Flisher had brought with her a tray as well as a large basket. Egg, idly observing her pre-

parations, saw that to-day they were to use saucers as well as cups, that the doorsteps of buttered bread were no more than half an inch thick, and that Flisher, so profound her sense of this occasion, had positively provided a white cloth for the tray. He, his heart softening towards his sister, silently applauded these refinements.

'Of course,' said Flisher, as though reading his thoughts, 'we've had ours. . . .'

Yes, it was inevitable that the girls should have already taken tea, with Mrs Pandervil, in the stuffy little drawing room of Fipenny Hall; for that Monica Wrenn, a young lady of breeding, should picnic with rough men in a hayfield had been too great a condescension, and one which, if offered, could never have been permitted by Mrs Pandervil. Yet Egg, while he so reasoned with himself, experienced the smallest pang of disappointment. He blushed, however, with a sense of his unworthiness when Flisher continued:

'. . . though I b'lieve Monica would a liked to have it in the fields here.'

Egg looked—this time steadily and with purpose—at Monica. 'Would you really?' he asked.

She laughed, and answered with a pretty and unexpected emphasis: 'Indeed I would!' And another little heartbreaking melody was added to Egg's rich store. How did this girl so powerfully and easily enchant him? Was she more beautiful, more kind, more clever than others of her sex? Indeed she was. She had a smile of infinite candour and sweetness; she had a dimple, and long

dark lashes, and eyes that were at once bright and soft and thoughtful. Each one of these charms seemed, when she was silent, to be the secret of her, but when she spoke he felt that the magic was all in her voice, the enchantment summed up in the fact that the cadences of her speech were always deliciously unexpected. It may be that the whole of Egg's life turned on this pivot: that where another's voice would come to rest with an effect of finality on the last word, Monica's rose by an exquisite fraction of a tone and left her words delicately suspended in air, her speech beautifully unfinished as though it were a windborne phrase from the unending music of fairyland, and her hearer excited, expectant, and tantalized with a happy hunger for more. Egg never got used to these surprises; his memory cherished her cadences, learning them by heart and counting them over with a miser's passion; yet when they fell again upon his ears they were always new—new minted gold, fresh blossoming flowers, stars flashing in a blue sky, an ancient music never heard before.

He said again: 'Would you really!' And this time he could hardly keep pride and tenderness out of his voice. What wonder could ever exceed the wonder of her having been willing, indeed eager, to share, in a hayfield with the likes of himself, tea poured rudely from a jug into thick cups more than one of which shewed dirty brown cracks, instead of sipping delicately, in a ladylike fashion, from Mrs Pandervil's best china? It was impossible that there was another girl in the world with

so free and generous a spirit. And she so cultivated and accomplished, understanding poetry and all!

She nearly blushed, meeting his look. 'Yes, why not? How absurd you are!' Quickly she glanced away from him to stare at the bronze hair of Flisher who was kneeling in front of her basket. 'Can I be of any help?'

'Here comes the others,' remarked Egg, to ease the tension, the very existence of which, nevertheless, gave him profound satisfaction and excited him with hope. Also he was uplifted by her calling him absurd, for her manner of saying the word—her bright glance, her wide smiling mouth, the quick downcasting of the eyes that had suggested an imminent blush—imparted to it a quality that was almost fondness, as of a mother for her beloved comical child. It made him feel at once like a little boy and like a god; proud, an accepted lover; humble, a willing slave. I am a giant, I am crude and strong, his heart said; and you, so small and frail, can with a word or a glance quell me. His mind, being inarticulate, said no such thing. Nor was she in fact either small or frail, as her sex went; she was generously made and lusty with a lustiness that gave peculiar piquancy, the right touch of intoxicated madness, to his sense of her being a lovely child, young and little, helpless and unprotected. She was a miracle and by a miracle sustained; because he loved and desired her he saw her beauty sharpened by the shadow of an unimaginable danger, a danger from which,

whatever it might be, he and he alone, by virtue of this new irresistible power descended upon him from heaven, could defend her.

The approaching Algernon, seeing a strange girl, paused a few yards from the group; then with a kind of obstinacy in his demeanour came boldly on. Not waiting for an introduction, being in fact a little too obviously terrified of so idle and genteel a ceremony, he nodded towards Monica, muttering: 'How de do, miss!' And to Flisher he hastened to say, in a voice unwontedly loud. 'Cup a tea's just about my ticket. Got plenty of sugar in? Eh, Flisher?' The three other men—for Potty Oaks was among them, though not safe to be entrusted with a scythe and therefore of no practical use—grouped themselves dubiously at a respectful distance. 'Come and get your tea, you men!' shouted Algernon in his grandest manner. Shewing off! thought Egg. But his mind was busy not with Algernon's awkwardness but with the question whether he could fitly offer Monica his jacket to sit on, or whether he would do better to wear it. The jacket was hanging on the gatepost ten yards away; and Egg, as he now realized with some embarrassment, was in his shirt sleeves. What a sight he must be for a lady, he all hot and sweaty and shewing his braces! But looking at her again he ceased to remember himself, being filled anew with sheer wonder and with a wish to serve. He ran and fetched the jacket and spread it at her feet.

'Won't you sit down on this?' From his kneel-

ing position he looked up at her; her lips were forming a polite refusal as she glanced down. He was aware of disappointment, a hunger unassuaged, and then, as she smiled acquiescence, of instant and heavenly relief. She had added wonder to wonder by consenting to make use of his jacket. His eyes shone gratefully upon her downsitting. For a while he thought his happiness complete.

The next time he glanced at her she was shewing unmistakable signs of distress. He turned quickly round to find Potty Oaks, with his mouth half open, staring at her hungrily and without disguise. Egg jumped to his feet, snatched up a huge piece of bread and butter, and accosted the half-wit brusquely. 'Here, put this in your mouth. And be off with you!' Potty received the food and the admonition without a word. He continued to stare at Monica, his expression unchanged. 'Be off, I tell you!' said Egg angrily, and seizing him by both arms swung him violently round. Reluctantly, with a sidelong glance, Potty shambled towards the gate; and Egg red with confusion, turned back in time to see a meaning leer pass from Higlett to Dan the cowman. 'What's tickling you, Higlett?' he demanded in a fierce undertone. It was a mistake. He felt that he was making an exhibition of himself, and when he rejoined his own party he was met with curious stares by Algernon and Flisher. Monica herself was bent low over the picnic basket, contriving to hide her face in a pretended search for something. Her attitude was

eloquent of shame. 'That lad's getting out of hand,' muttered Egg, in self-extenuation. 'He'll be breaking out one of these days. Not safe it isn't. Why don't they put him away?'

Algernon shrugged his shoulders. 'What makes you say that, all of a sudden? Wasn't doing any harm as I could see. Mighty touchy, aren't you?'

Flisher's smile was more pointed than Algernon's speech. Egg, to escape from it, turned covertly, sadly, towards Monica. Her back was towards him, but at that moment, as if in response to his silent appeal, she flashed at him, over her shoulder, one quick radiant glance. And at once he was a new man, a man enthroned above the stars, caring nothing for Higlett's leering innuendoes and Algernon's stupidity, and raised far beyond reach of Flisher's barbed smiles. Gratitude gushed in his heart, and he yearned with sudden passion to spend himself utterly for the author of this new life, that he might prove himself hers. His imagination became grandiose, his demands extravagant. He caught himself almost wishing that these men, these two labourers and his brother, were visibly menacing Monica instead of merely failing in due reverence to her, so that he might have fought them all and slaughtered them and thrown their silly carcases into the sea. He forgot that the sea was some hundreds of miles away—a man in love cannot think of everything. The next moment he felt a little ashamed of this braggart fancy, and he began saying to himself;

If only I could tell her. If only . . . if only . . . There seemed, alas, so little chance of that.

Labouring to create a diversion he said: 'So Sarah didn't come to-day?'

Flisher's stare was uncompromising. 'Whadjou mean Sarah didn't come?'

'Down here with the tea,' said Egg. 'She came yesterday, but not to-day,' he added lamely.

'No, indeed!' cried Flisher importantly. 'Because why? Because her Reverend Twigg came to see her, if you please!'

'What, the curate!' exclaimed Algernon. 'You never told us. Mighty secret all of a sudden!'

'Why?' asked Egg. His surprise was sincere enough. 'There's nothing very important in Mr Twigg, is there?' He flushed, remembering when it was too late that Mr Twigg was the Vicar's new curate, and that Monica was the Vicar's niece.

'Oh, isn't there!' said Flisher. 'That's all you know, my dear. Nothing very important, eh? Better tell our Sarah that, and see what happens.'

Egg, glancing at Monica, was ashamed of this conversation, ashamed of his brother and his sister. That they should expose their silly matchmaking fancies to the gaze of Miss Wrenn was a burden hardly to be borne. He himself had noticed nothing of what they hinted; but now, looking back, he had to admit that Mr Twigg's visits to the Ridge Farm had been surprisingly frequent and regular. A large fair man, this Mr Twigg, with prominent ears, and hands a size too big for him; good at games and popular with the village

lads; a little too hearty, a little too jolly, a little too solemn, every quality slightly in excess; a Muscular Christian born out of due time. Mr Twigg did not talk much about religion, but one gathered that he felt it the more for that. He sometimes, rather disconcertingly, interpolated a pregnant comment on wordly affairs when it was least expected. 'Faith without Works is Dead, Miss Minnow,' he remarked, when his organization of the village cricket was under discussion. 'Not everyone that saith unto me, Lord, Lord . . .' And indeed if anyone was disposed to say unto Mr Twigg 'Lord, Lord!', it was Miss Minnow, a gentle fast-fading spinster of thirty-five who obviously adored him. More than once she happened to be taking tea with Mrs Pandervil when the curate called. 'You make everything so *clear*, Mr Twigg,' she would say, with a sigh. 'And you have such *original* thoughts.' These compliments Mr Twigg would turn aside with a mildly reproving smile. 'Ah no, Miss Minnow! It's all in the Book, and he who Runs may Read.' Mr Twigg was 'broad' to the point of daring; he thought that even Dissenters might escape damnation if only they 'did good', if only they 'led good lives'; for, as he once declared from the pulpit itself, he did not presume to set limits to the mercy of God. One gathered that, within reason, Mr Twigg gave God a free hand, always provided that there was no weakening on the great Roman question, for it was an open secret that Mr Twigg was very angry with

the Pope. All things considered, the curate was a splendid fellow. He had a rich baritone voice and he sometimes sang hearty secular songs in the Pandervils' drawing room, to Sarah's stammering pianoforte accompaniment. Small wonder that Sarah loved him—the wonder (thought Egg, with brotherly blindness) was that he should have seen anything exciting in Sarah.

Monica remarked shyly: 'I think I ought to be going home if you'll excuse me. Auntie will wonder——'

'Oh, don't hurry!' cried Flisher. 'I'm coming too in a minute and Mr Twigg will take you back, won't he? They know you're safe with him.' Flisher turned to Egg, eagerly explanatory. 'You see, Egg, it was Mr Twigg brought Miss Wrenn to see us—brought Monica, I mean.'

Egg, with a superhuman effort, said as casually as he could: 'If Miss Wrenn really wants to go——' He turned in confusion to Monica: 'Let me see you home.'

'Thank you very much.' His heart leaped. 'But there's no need for anyone to come with me. It's only a few yards.' His heart sank again. 'And,' added Monica, 'Mr Twigg *will* be waiting for me at your house. I'd forgotten about Mr Twigg.'

She had forgotten about Mr Twigg: that was as it should be. But the more Egg thought of Mr Twigg, the less he liked the situation. The fellow had brought Monica to see them, had he! The two were living under the same roof, the Vicar's

roof ... Egg hoped with all his heart that Mr Twigg would make haste to marry Sarah.

3

When at the first intimation of dusk Egg and Algernon came in from the fields, they found the kitchen, where supper was laid, all but deserted, Martha alone being in attendance there and waiting for them. She, as gawky now as Flisher had been two years before, looked more attractive than usual, being greatly uplifted by her sense of office, and flushed with the excitement of being in the midst of unusual events. For the visitors, it seemed, were not yet gone; they were at this very moment in the drawing room with the seniors of the family. Sarah had been playing, with great acceptation, *List to the Convent Bells* and Handel's *Harmonious Blacksmith;* Mr Twigg had sung *Bid me Discourse* and a song about a storm at sea of which Sarah had been for weeks secretly practising the accompaniment; and Miss Wrenn, too, in a sweet husky voice, ever so deep and strange, like a man's almost (said Martha), had sung such a nice song, you never did! And, to crown the wonder, sandwiches and cakes had been provided at a moment's notice as you might say, and Mr Pandervil (in person) had broached a bottle of port wine. There never had been such an evening before, and it could have but one meaning.

'You'd never guess,' declared Martha 'Never.'

Egg declined to guess; but he was conscious of immense relief, and he longed to hear that Sarah

and Mr Twigg were definitely and irrevocably betrothed. The man was clearly a fool, since, having seen Monica, he still desired Sarah; but so long as he remained free he might, by some mischance, lapse into sanity.

'We know all about it,' said Algernon. 'Don't we, Egg?'

Martha's face fell. 'Oh, well——' She tossed her head. 'If you know, you'll not need telling.'

'We don't really know, Martha,' said Egg. He shot out a hand as she was passing, caught her by the shoulder and spun her playfully round. 'Come along, out with it.'

She eyed him dubiously a moment; then decided to struggle a little; but he was too strong for her, she couldn't escape. 'I'll tell *you*, Eggie,' she said, 'but not *him*!' To Algernon she showed the tip of her tongue. 'I'll whisper,' said Martha, and, like the child she still was, put her arms round Egg's neck as he bent down towards her. 'Somebody's engaged to be married!'

'Who?' asked Egg.

'Aren't you surprised?'

'Yes, of course, I'm surprised. Somebody engaged! Well I never! But who is it, Martha?'

'Well, it's Mr Twigg for one. I *love* Mr Twigg, don't you?'

'You bet I do!' said Egg. 'Who's the other?'

'Well, it's not Flisher.'

'Fancy that now!' exclaimed Egg, with irony that passed, as he intended it should, for appreciation of Martha's dramatic effects. 'Well?'

'Egg,' whispered Martha, still more mysteriously, 'suppose now it was Miss Wrenn?'

He stood rigid, held fast in an agony of fear. He heard his heart thumping, thumping, in a vast void. He heard himself exclaim in a loud unnatural tone: 'Suppose your grandmother! It's Sarah, of course. Of course it's Sarah. Don't talk nonsense, Martha!'

Algernon intervened, his mouth full of bread and cheese. 'Well, what if it is! Nothing to lose your wool about, is it?' He grinned cheerfully. 'We'll manage without the lass, I dessay.'

Martha said no more; Egg remained stretched upon the rack of his fear. It was absurd, this surmise, but not impossible. Everything pointed to Sarah; yet it might be . . . it might be . . . And he could not bring himself to question Martha any more; he could only pray that her tongue might be loosened without his further self-exposure. Already Flisher, and perhaps Algernon too, had divined his state. He sat down at the table and began his supper. He was in a fever. His nerves twitched. He frequently shifted his position on the chair, every movement being marked by the sound of hobnails scraping the brick floor. Seeking distraction from his anxious thoughts he allowed his glance, as he munched, to wander aimlessly about the room. It came to rest at the dresser, which was full of gleaming white crockery, Mother's pride; and he suddenly thought how richly satisfying it would be to shy something at that stuff and hear it smash and see it fall. He

became aware that Martha was eyeing him speculatively, and that all Algernon's attention was on the food. And then the latch was lifted and Sarah herself stood in the doorway.

'Aren't you coming in, boys?'

Sarah was radiant; her eyes sparkled and birds sang in her voice. In years verging upon thirty, she now looked twenty-five, all her ordinariness transfigured by a sudden unexpected blossoming of the spirit. Her joy, telling its own story, was communicated to Egg; and being released from his own fear he forgot his hope as well, and a brotherly affection filled him. Good old Sarah, he thought; and then he said his thought aloud and, shaken out of habitual shyness, got out of his chair and flung himself upon Sarah, boyishly, and gave her the kind of playful bear's hug he had sometimes given her as a child and never since.

'Why, Eggie!' said Sarah, blushing with pleasure. 'What's come over the boy!' Grinning, and already confused, he saluted her cheek with a loud half-comical kiss. 'Great silly!' she said fondly. 'But aren't you boys coming in? We've been having music and I don't know what all. Have you finished your suppers, both?'

Now that he was within an ace of seeing Monica again, Egg was frightened. He looked down at his clothes. 'I'm too dirty for company.'

'Oh, never mind. They'll not notice that. You coming, Algy?'

'Bed for me,' said Algernon. 'Give my love to Ernest, old gal.' He winked at his sister.

'Get along with you!' said Sarah rosily.

The men went to their shared bedroom. Egg began diligently scrubbing himself and brushing his clothes, watched silently by his brother who had lost no time in undressing and getting into bed.

'What d'you want to go to bed for, Algy? It's early yet.'

'Nine o'clock nearly. Late enough for me. I'm tired. Come to that, what d'you want to doll yourself up for at this time o' night?'

Egg shrugged his shoulders. 'Something to do.'

His next operation made Algernon sit up in bed with staring eyes. 'Good sakes alive! You're never going to clean your teeth *now!*'

'Looks like it,' said Egg, wishing he dared be so eccentric as to shave the golden down from his cheeks and chin.

'What, at bedtime!'

'Why not?'

'Well I'm——' Algernon sank back on the pillow, apparently in despair of ever understanding his queer young brother. During the next few minutes he must have indulged in unwonted mental exercises, for when finally, the toilet completed, Egg lifted the latch of the bedroom door, a loud chuckle from the bed advertised Algernon's discovery of a new idea. It was an aggressive chuckle, not to be ignored.

'Well,' said Egg, pausing. 'Let's have it.'

'Hullo, Egg!' cried Algernon, shooting up in bed again. 'Not gone yet? He grinned. 'Well, good luck, boy!'

'What do you mean?' Egg demanded.

'Perhaps I'm not so blind as you think,' remarked Algernon. 'And you're a gay young spark, you are, to be sure! Got a clean handkerchief?'

Egg, putting a bold face on it, came back into the room and opened a drawer. 'Thanks for reminding me. Have to be a bit particular with parsons about.'

'Better put some scent on it,' advised Algernon. And, intoxicated by his own wit, he burst into a roar of laughter.

Egg, though embarrassed and confused, was glad to find Algernon in a friendly mood again, for he knew that there was now no malice in his chaff. 'Well, look here, Algy,' he said. 'Don't go talking to anyone, will you?'

As if pleased and flattered by the appeal Algernon at once became sober. 'Not a word. Trust me, lad. . . Goo' night.'

'Night!' said Egg gratefully, from the passage. He closed the door, and made his way downstairs.

As he passed through the kitchen a new obstacle appeared in his thoughts. 'Martha!' His voice was sharp with nervousness. Martha, as he could hear, was washing the supper things. Hearing no answer from her, he ran to the scullery door. 'Martha, did anyone do the milking?'

'There now!' said Martha. 'I wonder if our Sarah—no, she couldn't have! Reverend Twigg's been here for *hours*, he has. Ever since tea, *and* before.'

'Oh, all right.' Egg's voice was dull with despair. 'Just tell 'em in the drawing room that I've gone to do it, will you?'

Without another word he clumped into the yard where, in the dim light, he could see the cows—fabulous sculptured beasts with the moon rising behind them—grouped near the gate in the field beyond, mutely waiting to be admitted. He opened the gate, called intimately to the cows, and watched them lurch past him, one by one, into their shed. Only five in milk, thank God! But five was enough to prevent his seeing Monica again that night.

He lost himself in an unhappy dream, his head resting against a cow's flanks, his fingers mechanically working the teats, his mind drowsed by the rhythmic resonant sound of the milk spurting into the pail. 'Come up, Blossom! Come round, lass! Steady now!' He lost sense of time and place, thinking only of Monica and Sarah and the Reverend Twigg and a hundred other distant things. And he went on milking cow after cow . . . until his attention was caught by a ray of light moving across the wall of the shed, a faint glow that with every passing moment grew more golden. He heard steps on the cobbled yard, and a voice speaking. It was Martha's voice. The next moment Martha came to the door of the shed carrying a storm lantern.

'Hullo, Egg! You haven't finished yet, have you?'

Egg grunted. 'All but one.' He did not look up.

'He says he hasn't finished yet,' said Martha, over her shoulder. 'He's got one more to do.'

At that he turned quickly on his stool. In the darkness behind Martha something moved. His breath came fast; he stood up eagerly. Monica stepped delicately into the circle of light.

'Miss Wrenn,' explained Martha, 'hasn't ever seen a cow milked, Egg. Fancy! Isn't it funny!'

'So I've come to see you now,' said Monica. There was a ripple of laughter in her voice. 'I hope you don't mind being watched?' While he was stammering an answer she interrupted him to say: 'I mustn't stay long. Mr Twigg will be waiting to go. It's very late.'

'Mr Twigg can go,' said Egg. 'I mean,' he hastily added, 'Mr Twigg needn't wait. I can see you back to the Vicarage if you'll let me.' He hoped his face was in shadow, so that young Martha could not read its expression.

Monica made no reply, but presently she said: 'How soon will you be finished? Five minutes? Well, perhaps your sister wouldn't mind telling Mr Twigg.' She turned to Martha. 'Would you be awfully nice, Martha, and run and tell Mr Twigg that I'm watching a cow being milked and that afterwards your brother is kindly going to see me back to the Vicarage?'

'Yes, Miss Wrenn.'

'Perhaps Mr Twigg will catch up with us? We'll go round by the road, shall we?' she asked him.

The way by road was four times as far as the

way by the fields. 'Yes, by the road,' agreed Egg, eagerly.

'Please tell him, will you?' said Monica. 'Good-night, Martha!'

Martha hesitated. 'Shall I say good-night for you to Mother?'

'Oh, I spoke to Mrs Pandervil before I came out,' said Monica.

When his young sister was gone, Egg ventured to look at Monica. He was brimming with joy in the thought that perhaps—her having said good-bye to his mother made it probable—she had not only made this milking an excuse for seeing him, but had even counted on his taking her home. Of course it was no more than kindness in her, a sweet maidenly pity for a need he had been unable to hide; but none the less his heart sang, and he could have fallen at her feet in gratitude.

The last cow was now all but drained of her milk. Her udder was empty, but despite his eagerness to be gone, he remained to urge a few reluctant drops from each teat in turn, the teats being held at the top, where they joined the udder, with his left hand, and squeezed slowly downwards—so that they looked limp and elastic—between three fingers and the thumb of his right hand. Then he carried his pail of milk to the dairy, shouted to Martha in the house, and without waiting for an answer rejoined Monica Wrenn.

They stood facing each other in the dim light of a newly-risen moon, the farmyard smells—an earthy exhalation—rising about them. Egg's fever

left him. He had found her again and he was content. For all the agonies of the day this moment, this surpassing peace, richly atoned.

'Are you ready?'

She answered: 'Yes.' Her voice was as cool and confident as his own.

'We'll go to the orchard,' said Egg; and they began walking side by side.

For a while there was silence between them, but as they reached the gate of the orchard, Monica abruptly stopped and said: 'Oh, dear! I've just remembered something.'

'What is it?' he asked.

'I told them we'd go by the road.'

'Never mind,' said Egg. After a pause he grew bolder and added: 'So much the better. He'll not overtake us now.'

The orchard received them in a silence made magical, and left unbroken, by the trickle of the brook and the occasional movement of a wakeful sheep. The young apples clustering above their heads were silvered by moonlight; and, except where the wooded hillside cast its strong shadow over the valley, the whole orchard was flecked with a delicate, a ghostly radiance. At intervals there were little cheepings and flutterings—a rabbit, a night bird, some warm secret life; the grass rustled softly underfoot, the ground seeming billowy like smoke, undulating like a green and silver sea; and the moon, a bright extravagant wonder, breaking free of the net of trees in which it had seemed to be caught, floated slowly up the

sky. In this unsubstantial world the boy and the girl move unconstrained, for a while, like disembodied spirits, being one with the beauty about them, and breathing with every breath an intoxication that made speech of no account. But presently, his mortal sense awakening, that sense of passing time which goads man from pure ecstasy to action, he stretched out an arm and seized her hand. They stood once more, he and she, on solid earth, her large eyes, grown larger with wonder, gravely regarding him. What could he say? He tried to say that he loved her; but the words, so insignificant compared with this invisible reality vibrating between them, failed of utterance. He could get no further than her name. 'Monica . . . Monica.' Her gaze faltered at sight of his worshipping eyes; and instinctively, without coquetry, she made as if to hide her eyes. 'Ah, no! Let me look at you!' His fingers reverently stroked her cheeks. 'Monica! Darling!' With a shudder of delight he let his hands fall gently on her shoulders, and murmured her name once more. And then he had reached her lips, and the world was annihilated in bliss.

When they released each other and stood apart, dazed and trembling, a hundred half-formed doubts and fears beat feebly in his brain. How had he so dared! What must she think of him! But to such things he paid no attention.

'Let's sit down.'

He took off his coat and spread it on the dewy grass for her to sit on. His arm encircled her shoulder, against which she confidingly nestled.

With his free hand he fell again to stroking her soft, rose-petal cheeks, long shuddering sighs marking the rhythm of his adoration.

Presently she remarked, with a comical frown: 'What sticky fingers!'

'The milk's dried on them,' he said ruefully. 'I ought to have washed again.' His hand dropped despondently to his lap.

'*Darling* sticky fingers!' she cried, and snatched at them and pressed her lips against them.

She was laughing fondly at him; and laughing, but with laughter that quickly dissolved in compassionate tenderness, she suffered him again to enfold her, and met bravely, with sweet candour, the lips that craved her own. Without thought or intention he urged her gently backwards till she was lying full length on the ground. He flung himself down beside her, and, leaning on his elbow, crooked his left arm to make a pillow for his head. Bewildered with bliss, he gazed down upon her face, of which the essential character, the eternal sign, seemed luminously defined in this dim, strange, quietly breathing night. She was strong and proud and generous, and she loved him; nobly proportioned; innocent and ardent. She was womanhood, she was a woman, and she was Monica. Lying so still she might have been a sculptured goddess; but humanity shone in her great dark eyes and stirred in her bosom; her warm breath fanned his cheek. All the heaped treasure of the world, more than all that life had ever promised him, lay in this little space; all heaven was caught,

and crystallized, in this arrest of time. She smiled up at him, kindly, confidingly; and his lips grew hungry again.

With this third kiss, the longest and the deepest, a new pain quickened into life. 'Oh, I wish . . . ' He sighed and sighed again. 'I wish we could be married soon, quite soon.'

'Do you? Poor little boy!'

He stared at his dismal prospects. 'It will be years and years. And could you bear to marry a poor farmer? Of course you couldn't!'

'Of course not!' she said, tenderly ironical.

'But really!' He looked dolorously at her. 'It will be awful to wait so long.'

'Don't think about it,' said Monica. 'Think about Now. We've got Now, haven't we? And nothing can ever take this away, nothing ever, whatever happens.'

'Nothing,' he declared fervently.

After that they were silent—whether for a long or for a brief while they neither knew nor troubled to inquire, for they had found a world in which time had no meaning. The quietude enclosing them—moonlight and rich shadows, the smell of grass and the sound of running water, all blended in one brimming cup—was unbroken by any rumour of what they had left behind. Monica's hair became loosened and fell at a touch of Egg's delighted fingers. She sat up with a little cry. 'Oh, my hair! How dreadful!' Blushing faintly, with startled eyes, she gazed at him; and the hair fell about her shoulders, a dark cascade, darker than

night, and gave a new and exquisite definition to her face. Framing this revelation between his cupped hands Egg kissed her broad white brow, and kissed with small impetuous kisses that white middle path where the hair divided. And presently, with rising ardour, he gathered all her responsive loveliness into his arms, and again they fell back together into the grass, mouth yearning to mouth. His caresses became more eager and more fierce; imagination burst into flame; he stroked her breasts and his lips became importunate to reach the warm white hidden wonder of the valley that lay between them.

'Hush!' she said, pushing him gently away.

Her tone forbade him, and he was filled suddenly with shame. 'Forgive me!'

'Dear boy, dear love.' She fondled his bowed head, and with her own hands guided it to her lap. 'Be my good child, and lie still.'

He lay still, quiet and still, under her stroking fingers. Peace slowly invaded his heart, and a delicious drowsiness filled his brain. And presently, in a half-dream, he became aware of a crooning voice, heavenly deep, heavenly soft, soft and deep as love itself, the voice of an immaculate mother.

4

He roused to hear her say: 'I wonder what the time is!' But, when he opened his eyes, the poise of her head bending over him was so still, her gaze so untroubled, that he fancied he must have

dreamed that she had spoken. They remained for a few moments looking at each other in silence.

'Egg, it must be very late.'

'Is it? Have I been asleep?'

'It must be ten o'clock. We must go.'

He stretched out his arms to her from where he lay. They kissed each other again, but as she drew away from him he saw that there was a shadow on her face.

'Listen!' she said.

'I can't hear anything.'

'No. Listen to me. We must go now. These are our last moments together.'

'Darling!' He was incredulous, protesting. 'Our last?' He sat up and put his arms protectively, possessively about her. 'How can you say that?'

With her face half turned away, so that he saw only her strong, perfect profile, she answered in a strange voice: 'Our last moments to-night, I mean. We've stayed here too long—people will miss us and look for us. We shall be in disgrace.'

He kissed her cheek. 'Come along, darling!' Even now he was shy of that word. 'I'll take you to the Vicarage at once.' Realization of his folly swept suddenly over him; the world, jealous of perfection, reached back into his mind. 'Will you get into trouble, Monica? What a selfish brute I've been! Let's go at once.'

He helped her to his feet, and they clung to each other with tragic urgency. How could they walk out of this enchanted place and say farewell!

Yet that was what they must do. She gave a little moaning cry. 'Oh, Egg!' Tears glistened in her eyes.

He tried to comfort her. 'There's to-morrow, Monica. Think of that.'

'Yes.' She was staring past him, perhaps at a long vista of to-morrows. 'But, Egg, even if there wasn't going to be any to-morrow, we've had to-night, haven't we, and we'll always have to-night. Nothing can take it away from us. And we'll always—love each other. We'll never feel any different, will we!'

'Never, never!' vowed he with all his heart. 'I'll get rich somehow. I'll work for you, so that we can be married soon.'

She said again: 'We'll have this always. We'll keep this safe, safe.' And he again, kissing her eyes and her hair, vowed that nothing should ever part them. So with joy and pain in their hearts, and fear crouching behind them, they strove with words and wishes against the unappeasable tides. 'We must really go now,' he said at last.

She stood rigid, terror in her eyes. 'There's somebody coming.'

Footsteps approached. A voice near at hand called her by name, sternly. 'Monica!' The lovers broke apart and turned round defensively.

'It's Uncle,' whispered the girl. 'And Mr Twigg's with him. They've seen us.'

The transition was too abrupt, the expulsion from paradise too sudden. Dazed, like children reluctantly waking from a dream, they stood

motionless, while the lean stooping figure of the Vicar sidled menacingly up to them. They were tongue-tied, in a silence that passed, no doubt, for shame, but was rather sheer stunned bewilderment.

'Well, madam!' said the Vicar. 'I never thought to be ashamed of my niece. As for you, sir——' He turned heavily to Egg. 'What have you to say for yourself? No, don't dare to answer me, you young ruffian. I saw enough with my own eyes—too much, too much! Your father shall hear of this!' He made a dart at Monica, grasped her by the arm, and commanded: 'Put your bonnet on, girl, this instant!' Monica stared back at him in terror and amazement, still dangling her sunbonnet by its strings. The delicious disarray of her hair made her look even younger than her years. 'Do you hear me, Monica!'

'Yes, Uncle.' She donned the hat.

'Then come home at once!'

Egg, striving to collect his scattered wits, stumbled in their wake, stammering: 'Wait, sir. I'm to blame, sir, not she. Let us explain. Won't you wait a minute, sir?'

A hand on his shoulder arrested him. '*I* shall deal with *you*,' said the Reverend Mr Twigg, in his best organ voice. He paused before adding, with tremendous emphasis: 'As—you—deserve!'

'Be damned! Let me go!'

Mr Twigg's grip tightened, and with sonorous unction he answered: 'Profanity will not avail you, Egbert Pandervil. If there is one sin, boy,

more loathsome in God's sight than any other, it is this sin of yours, the seduction of innocent girlhood.'

Egg jerked himself free. 'It's not true, Mr Twigg. Let me explain.'

'Don't add lies to your other sins, I implore you. You have lingered in this orchard an hour or more in the company of that young lady, your mother's guest. I trusted you; she trusted you. It is not too much to say that God trusted you. And you have betrayed your trust. . . No, don't deny it! I have seen more than you know. You lay in the grass together——' A hungry gleam shone in the curate's eyes, and suddenly he lost control of his smooth sentences. He began shouting, and brandishing the stick he carried. 'You dissolute young cur, you vile seducer . . . I shall thrash you for this night's work.' It was a performance in his best manner.

He advanced threateningly upon Egg. The boy did not move; a queer smile played about his lips; his heart sang. The imprisoned savage in him saw its chance of a holiday. With something like hope he felt Mr Twigg's fingers fumbling for a grip of his shoulder; the stick descended on his legs—a sharp cut. He twisted round quickly, and fury welled up in him, gloriously uncontrollable at last. 'Lying bastard!' There was a kind of happiness in his voice. He dealt a smashing blow at the curate's face, and shouted again—the same ugly exultant cry. 'Lying bastard! Lying bastard! *Dirty* lying bastard!' Mr Twigg staggered back, letting

the stick fall to the ground; and returning to the attack with a blind impetuous rush he ran into a second blow as damaging as the first. Egg was fighting madly, without pity or thought. He hit and hit again, careless of his guard and quite unmindful of the rough-and-ready science he had picked up in the fights of schoolboyhood. And this savage method, or lack of method, useless though it had been if matched against skill as well as strength, served him well enough now. Mr Twigg had fight in him; he had, moreover, the advantage of Egg both in weight and reach; but the suddenness of the assault had overwhelmed him, and by the time he was intelligently aware of what was happening, and had settled down to systematic fighting, his nose was copiously bleeding and one of his eyes closed. With this double handicap he was already beaten, though he fought gamely for a few minutes. Egg himself was severely bruised; his face burned; there was a curious singing sensation in his ears. Yet it was with disappointment, his anger being still unquenched, that he at last saw the curate beaten to his knees and seeking cover behind helplessly waving arms. Egg stared down at him, his clenched fists slowly relaxing. What was next to be done? He realized, dispassionately, that there was a mess to be cleared up; and he walked unsteadily away in search of the brook, whose voice was now the only sound in that disenchanted Eden. It seemed a long journey to the brook, and the orchard trees swayed, lurching drunkenly towards

him, as he walked. The way back was easier, for the touch of cold water had refreshed him.

He found Mr Twigg lying on his back full length in the grass, his face swollen and bloody, his eyes closed. With a handkerchief, which to this end he had dipped in the brook, Egg laved his enemy's features. Anger was spent; he no longer hated Mr Twigg. Nor, on the other hand, did he experience any compassionate revulsion of feeling. He regarded the man with a cool indifference tempered only by the realization that he was weak, in pain, and needing help. But when Mr Twigg, being roused by the cold wet pad of handkerchief held gently against his forehead, turned over, and then, with a sigh, slowly raised himself to a sitting posture, some small kindlier feeling—something between impersonal charity and positive friendliness—stirred in Egg.

'Feeling better?' he asked.

'Thanks,' mumbled Mr Twigg. 'I'm quite all right.' He rose unsteadily to his feet. 'Right as rain.' He passed a hand across his forehead. 'I'll go now.'

They faced each other as equals.

'Good night,' said Egg. 'And,' he added slowly, as an afterthought, 'what you said wasn't true, you know.'

'What I said?' Mr Twigg had almost forgotten what he had said, just as he had forgotten, it seemed, his cloth. 'Perhaps not . . . I don't know . . . Good night.' He stooped to pick up his hat; then turned abruptly on his

heel. For five seconds, Egg stood staring after him. . . .

He found the farmhouse in darkness. Everyone was in bed and asleep—Algernon aggressively so; his snores were like a trumpet. As Egg crept in between the cool sheets of his bed he recalled with disgust his momentary feeling of satisfaction at sight of Mr Twigg's bloody face. The events of the night repeated themselves over and over again in a series of sharp pictures—such beauty as had never before been poured into one hour of time, and a sequel unprecedented in its ugliness and folly. But already he was forgetting Mr Twigg, the Vicar, the threatened consequences, Algernon's snoring—everything but Monica. The fight had already become a well-nigh incredible tale, remote, irrelevant. But Monica—ah, Monica was with him in the darkness, her kisses on his mouth, the scent of her loosened hair in his nostrils, her soft breasts pillowing his head. Darling Monica. Lovely Monica. Three times, with a little conscious effort, he had called her darling; but now, in this secret place, he invented a hundred wild passionate endearments to whisper to her. They came leaping and tumbling from his busy brain. And then, crossing the yard, he saw her running towards him. But as quickly as his arms went out to her she evaded him and began walking away, looking back over her shoulder fearfully, imploringly, with hand outstretched beckoning him on. He followed her down the lane, into the orchard; and there floating in the brook was Mr

Twigg with wide staring eyes and a twisted smile on his lips. Monica was no longer to be seen; but in her place was a wizened old lady in a white cap who smiled at Egg toothlessly and pointed at the moon. And though he knew that this old lady was somehow Monica herself, he yet believed that by searching the orchard through, by shaking every tree and scanning every blade of grass, he would find the other and earlier Monica. He didn't do so, for he was now in Mercester Cattle Market; and there was Monica herself, young and beautiful again, tied to a post. The Vicar stood near, idly prodding her with the point of his umbrella; and when Egg attempted to reach her he found that he himself was tethered, and that a number of dirty-nosed children, with a dead goose swinging between them, were standing near him, pointing and laughing. He could see them laugh and shout, but he could hear nothing. He could see Monica's screams, and the auctioneer grinning, and the schoolmaster (for he was in school now) writing figures on a blackboard with a piece of chalk that suddenly, with the noise of a pistol-shot, broke into two pieces. One of the pieces of chalk became a white mouse and ran across the drawing room and up Sarah's back, but Sarah, seated at the piano, went on playing Mr Twigg's accompaniment, and nobody noticed the little sucking-pig nestling in her hair. And suddenly all the people in the world crowded round Egg, so that he saw a million staring faces, one of which, the biggest and nearest, was Flisher's. Flisher carried a storm lantern

which she held close to his eyes so that the light dazzled him. The lantern—or was it Flisher?—made a loud shouting noise . . . and sunlight was in the bedroom, and Algernon was shaking him by the shoulder. 'Wake up, Eggie. Mowing to-day, boy!'

Egg answered sleepily, rubbing his eyes: 'What's time?'

'Hullo!' said Algernon. He stared in surprise. 'Cut your cheek, have you! Pillow's all over blood.'

Egg, jumping out of bed, answered evasively; but by the time he had finished washing himself he had realized the wisdom of satisfying his brother's curiosity. Algy lacked finesse, but he was loyal. He could be relied upon not to betray a confidence, unless by a show of mystery he inadvertently betrayed it. But if he were left entirely in the dark he would sulk, his lonely heart would generate malice—after this very familiar pattern was Algernon made.

'Doesn't look so bad now, does it?' Egg presented his face for inspection.

'Only a scratch,' agreed Algernon.

'It was Twigg's signet ring that did it, I'll wager,' said Egg.

'Twigg's signet ring!' Algernon gasped.

'Met him last night in the orchard,' explained Egg, carefully (too carefully) getting into his breeches. 'He said things I didn't like, and there was a bit of a fight.'

'A fight! You fought the Reverend Twigg!' Algernon's eyes widened.

'Yes.' Egg strove to be quiet and matter-of-fact. 'He said things I didn't like at all. So there was nothing for it but to have it out.'

'Things? What things?' Algernon, after a moment's deep thought, was visited by an inspiration. 'Things about that girl?' He was excited.

'Yes. About Monica Wrenn.'

'Did you lick him?'

'Well, you see,' explained Egg, 'I was a bit mad with him. He made out I'd done things I hadn't. And he let fly at me with a stick.'

'And you licked him?' asked Algernon again, jealous for the honour of the Pandervils.

Egg began pulling his boots on. 'I suppose so. He had enough of it anyhow . . . Of course, mum's the word. Say I slipped up in the yard and got niched with the scythe.'

'You don't catch *me* telling!' declared Algernon, rubbing his hands together in jubilation. 'Ah, that's a good 'un, that is! Give him a black eye, Egg, didjer?'

Deceiving Nature had done her work well, for, in the hayfield, Egg's mind—despite a sharp intermittent anxiety—played happily with pictures of a radiant future. His desires projected images of their own satisfaction. He saw himself a rich man with a farm of his own; he saw Monica as mistress of his home, and he followed her from room to room playing with her, making love to her, teasing her and being teased. And he thought of the long shared nights, nights of unimaginable beauty to which last night had been but the shy prelude.

Darling Monica. Lovely Monica. Life this morning had no meaning but Monica.

When Algernon went in to his midday meal, Egg, blushing an excuse, hastened to the Vicarage. Throughout all his rapturous reverie there had persisted a faint undertone of fear, which now he could no longer pretend to ignore.

He knocked at the Vicarage door.

He told the maidservant boldly: 'I want to speak to Miss Wrenn, please.'

'Miss Wrenn is confined to her room, Mr. Pandervil.'

Egg's heart began galloping. 'Is she ill?'

'I'll inquire for you,' said the maid. 'Will you please to step inside?'

He was not kept waiting long. The maid returned in ten seconds with the news that Miss Wrenn was indisposed and could see no one.

Egg stood his ground. 'Did Miss Wrenn herself say so?'

'I didn't venture to disturb her, sir. It was the Vicar that sent the message.'

This interview changed the colour of his thoughts. The day was a torment and the night a fever... At noon the next day he presented himself again at the Vicarage.

'Miss Wrenn is not here,' said the maid. 'She has gone home, I'm to tell you.'

Holding despair at arm's length he replied: 'You're to tell me. I daresay you are. But is it *true?*'

The girl's eyes softened. 'Yes, indeed, Mr. Egg. It's true enough. Off she went this morning, as

sure's sure. And my mistress with her. Ah, Mr. Egg, and she'd been crying, the poor young lady!'

He turned away without another word, knowing in his heart that this was the end.

5

First love had come late to Egg Pandervil, for his boyhood had been untroubled by amorous fancies and experiments. During all the dreaming years of adolescence, years lived in a spiritual solitude that was in effect cloistral, he had wooed beauty unawares, and love had gathered, drop by crystal drop, in his heart. Now at last, all being made ready, this vaguely apprehended dream had become alluring flesh, with eyes to enchant him, arms to enfold and lips to assuage, and—above all other wonders—a heart that answered his heart, a living and loving spirit. He had lived twenty years and Monica was the first woman he had ever seen. Upon this first love all the accumulated riches of his heart were squandered. Monica was the meaning and purpose and justification of his life; and he had lost Monica.

Five days after her going, a letter arrived for him, greatly to the excitement of his family. In her letter—queer mixture of primness and candour—she seemed far younger, in mind, than he had ever supposed her to be. This new and last revelation tore his heart with tenderness. He had always, despite her dazzling youth and perhaps because of her gentle breeding, believed her to be

far wiser and stronger than he; but now he saw her as a lovely, lonely, bewildered child, and himself as a man who had lived through centuries of pain. Monica wrote:

Your Monica is now far away. But why do I say your Monica when I can be yours no longer! For it seems I have been a very wicked girl, my dear Parents are very very angry and very sad, I have hurt them so. Perhaps it was wrong of me to do as I did and let you kiss me, and indeed I did more than let you for I wanted you to—but I fear I would act in the same way again, you were so sweet to me. So I must be very wicked indeed if what they say is true. And if that was a sin so is this letter one, for my Mother has forbade me to even think of you and I write these words against her command—to say good-bye to my good little child—do you remember the lullaby I sang to you? Dear boy, dear Love, you must not write to me even, because I shall not be allowed to read your darling letters—so it is good-bye! I am full of wild rebellious thoughts. I would rather share poverty with you than wed the wealthiest man in England, but a whole long year must pass before I shall be twenty-one and if anything were to happen to his cousin Richard my Father would be an Earl if you please—so there is no hope for us, dear Love, no hope at all. How I hate being a lady! I shall never forget the orchard and I pray that you may never be so wretched as your heart-broken Monica.

Underneath this was written in tiny caligraphy: 'Dearest, darlingest. How I love those sticky fingers!'

And now, for many days, the tangible world was less real to him than his love's phantom. A hundred times a day he caught himself fancying, for one mad moment, that she was here walking by his side, talking to him, laughing with him; and each several disillusion was a sword-thrust. The fields were populous with memories of her, associations sacred and terrible. Crossing the farmyard he imagined himself meeting her; in the hayfield he was tortured by mocking expectation; and the orchard he dared not enter. His heart was become a fountain of pain; whatever he thought of, whatever distraction he pursued, that thought betrayed him, that path led him back. He was haunted unendurably by the cadences of her speech, by chance phrases, by the funny little way she turned her head; in the midst of his work he would suddenly lose himself and stand at gaze, recalling this and that, the curve of her lips, the shape of her ear, until . . . surely she was here in the flesh, darling lovely Monica! Ah, no, she would never come again . . . By bitter experience he learned the folly of such indulgence; the pain of that inevitable return to reality was too great to be borne. Hating himself for what seemed like infidelity, he began cultivating forgetfulness, trying deliberately to occupy himself with little trivial practical affairs, and sending Monica away; but the very effort defeated itself, and the moment his strained vigil-

ance relaxed, she stole back into her kingdom. Sometimes, for very weariness, nature aiding, he forgot her for a while; and that was the worst experience of all, for after an interval the exiled memories would return, refreshed by oblivion, more radiant than before, to be greeted with a passionate and despairing ecstasy. Everything conspired to his undoing; the merest word, the most familiar sight, would recall her; his mind became infinitely cunning in self-betrayal. He learned to fear solitude but never to shun it. He feared every generous impulse, every stirring in him of kindness or pity; he tried to harden himself. In time he became afraid to think of any beautiful thing, for by that door, infallibly, Monica would enter him again. The sun shone with her light; birds sang with her laughing voice; summer's night, with leaves rustling and the sky moon-washed, was nothing but a reminiscence and false promise of her. Every night he went to bed worn out and eager to lay aside his burden of consciousness.

At last he told his father that he wanted to be sent away. 'I'm sick of farming.'

'Why?'

'I'm sick of it. I'm not happy here. Let me go away—to London, if you like, sir. I'll learn some trade and earn money to send home and help Mother.'

Mr Pandervil winced at the innocent implication.

'How will your brother manage without you?'

'He'll manage.' Egg didn't know how and didn't care. 'You can get another man, or a boy perhaps. He'll manage. He'll be glad to. I've spoken to him about it.'

'I'll think it over,' said Mr Pandervil.

Within ten days of this conversation Mr Pandervil was taken dangerously ill. Egg drove with reckless speed to fetch the doctor, glad to have found something that he could do with enthusiasm. But Monica remained with him; he was still possessed. And when they told him, weeks later, that Mr Pandervil was dead, his first thought was half-envious. Lucky Father!—his troubles are over. Then, remembering that queer melancholy smile, those delicate trembling hands, he groped his way out of the house, and suddenly, with childish abandonment, burst into tears.

CHAPTER THE THIRD

NOOM'S

I

If one were to describe a circle round London with the Bank of England for its centre and with a radius of say five and three quarter miles, at a certain north-easterly point the circumference of that circle would bisect Farringay High Street. Egg Pandervil found the place by the more direct method of buying a ticket and travelling on the newly constructed railway to the terminal station of a little branch line from King's Cross. The urbanization of Farringay was only just beginning. Its shops were but five in number and insignificant in appearance; its High Street boasted (and the word is accurate) but one lamp; and its Police Force was contained in one cottage. Critics of Farringay sometimes called it a one-eyed street, because nearly the whole of one side was occupied by the red-brick wall that enclosed the estate of Squire Oaks. Signs of progress, however, were not wanting. Drainpipes had been thoughtfully deposited upon the roadside against the time when it should occur to somebody to use them; and in the fields enclosing Coppett's Lane several stacks of bricks had been dumped—as an earnest of good inten-

tions—by a speculative builder who called himself Blogg and Brother. Blogg himself occupied a raw red double-fronted villa at the corner of Coppett's Lane, a very commanding position. Brother occupied no house at all, for Brother was a trade fiction; but this fiction had so deeply engaged the curiosity of Farringavians, and was so faithfully insisted upon by Blogg himself, that a fanciful man could not spend five minutes in the builder's company without being haunted by the sense of a third presence. 'We can do that for you, mister, in a brace of shakes,' Blogg would say. He himself was a tall lean fellow with vigorous black hair and a face as red as his own bricks; and when he added half under his breath, 'I'll see what me brother says,' he conjured up irresistibly a second edition of himself. This duplication of his personality gave him the beginnings of fame. It got him talked about; it got him sought after. In Farringay the phrase 'Blogg's brother' became a proverbial symbol for the non-existent. Unquestionably, whether he knew it or not, Blogg owed a great deal to his brother.

Egg's 'opening', so kindly found for him by Sarah's Mr Twigg, was in Noom's the village grocery. With a bag in his hand and a bundle on his shoulder, and feeling—perhaps looking—not unlike Dick Whittington, Egg walked into the shop just before closing-time on a Saturday evening. Never having been so far from home before, he felt numb with loneliness, realizing for the first time what comfort had flowed into him from the

fields and vistas of his native Mershire. His aching sense of loss was dulled but not dead; in his heart there was a name he dared not utter. He was alive, he was twenty-two, and the future awaited his discovery. He was anxious and curious to see what would happen to him next. It seemed indeed impossible that anything out of the ordinary could happen to him in this prosaic interior. The shop was dark and small, lit inadequately by lamplight, and smelling powerfully of cheese and watering-cans and oil. The room was so small, and so well stocked with goods, that Egg had the sensation of being jostled as by a crowd. There were two counters, one comparatively empty where the business of the post office had once been transacted, the other laden with biscuit-tins.

He stood, nervous, hesitating, savouring the quality of his new surroundings.

'Yes?'

The voice made him start guiltily. With a shock he became aware of a presence in the shop. Behind the grocery counter, more than half concealed by the ramparts of tins, sat a girl a few years younger than himself. She, like the shop, was dark and small; she had sharp eyes, plump cheeks, and a slightly tip-tilted nose. Egg, blushing in the knowledge that she had been watching him, was quick to read malice, or at least suspicion, in her air of alertness.

He said: 'Oh, I didn't see anyone there.'

She slipped down from her stool and came to the counter, across which she silently confronted him.

He felt very foolish, and he hated her for not helping him out with his explanation.

'I'm E. Pandervil,' he said presently. 'Come to help in the shop. Is Mrs Noom at home? She'll know all about me, I expect.'

'Name of Pandervil, did you say?' The girl's tone was brisk, but not unfriendly. 'I'll tell them.' She went to the back of the shop, opened a door, and bawled: 'Pa! Ma!' After waiting a second or two she said, answering a voice inaudible to Egg: 'Yes, it's him all right.' Then she returned to the young man. 'I'm their daughter, you know. Carrie Noom.' This time her tone was definitely and encouragingly that of a friend. He ventured on a shy smile, because it seemed absurd to be afraid of such a youngster; but he was too busy with expectation of her parents to think of anything to say to her. The briskness of her movements was not unpleasing; her youth was attractive; her nose offered a hint of agreeable impudence.

'Well,' said the girl, 'Pa don't seem to be coming. And it's time to shut up the shop.' She vanished behind the biscuit-tins, to reappear the next instant behind the empty counter, the flap of which she lifted. 'Holiday to-morrow, thank goodness!' she remarked, joining Egg in the outer part of the shop.

'Can I help?' asked Egg politely. 'With shutting up the shop, I mean.' He was nervously eager to be of use. 'How do you do it?'

'Like this,' said Miss Noom. She danced to

the door; slammed it; bolted it. 'You just shut it, see?' She grinned at the young man, her head cocked pertly on one side, so that one of her two pigtails was shaken out of place and fell across her bosom. 'It's quite easy when you know how.'

Egg laughed. He liked this child. 'What about the shutters?'

'Yes,' admitted the girl. 'There's them too. And this top bolt here—'stoo high up for me.'

'Lemme try,' said Egg. With magnificent ease —his arm stretching over her head—he shot the top bolt.

'My!' said the girl. 'You *are* a lank and no mistake!' Her frank admiration warmed him.

There was a pause, and he was beginning to feel self-conscious when she remarked: 'Well, we'd better be getting in. Perhaps you'd like a bite of something. But I may as well tell you—you've got to know sooner or later—Mother's not speaking to-day.'

'Not speaking?'

The girl nodded. 'There's days when she don't speak. You'd as well know now as later.'

'Is she . . . ill?'

'Well, you might say so.' Her manner was judicial rather than mysterious. 'Headaches and that. When she gets one of her headaches she don't speak. And she's got one of her headaches to-day . . . Let's come and talk to Pa.'

Pa was discovered to be sitting quietly by himself in the kitchen, an unregarded book on his knees. He was a small, plump, chubby man of sixty or

more, with bluer eyes and redder cheeks and less hair than most men of his age. Eyebrows raised, and head held at an angle that enabled him to peer over the lenses of his reading spectacles, he was gazing at the patch of dove-grey sky framed by the inadequate window.

'Well, Pa! Here's Mr Pandervil come.'

Startled out of a reverie, Mr Noom turned blinking eyes upon his daughter. 'What's the matter, my dear?'

'This is the new man come to help in the shop. Name of Pandervil.'

The old gentleman—for indeed he seemed old rather than elderly—rose to his feet. Until then he might have passed for an eccentric scholar, a gentle dreaming academic person like Egg's own father. But his movements, his manner, his half-deferential clasping of hands—these things suggested his trade. 'Ah!' said Mr Noom. 'Good evening, young man. I remember perfectly. Name of Pennyman—no, Pandervil. *I* remember.' Vaguely benevolent he stared at Egg. 'Let me see. Ah yes! It was Mr Twigg told us about you. Gave you a good character, Mr Twigg did. And there's nothing like a good character, my boy. And so you want to be a grocer, do you?'

What madness was this! Put into plain words the suggestion sounded fantastic. Yet Egg had to admit that no one could be blamed for supposing he wanted to be a grocer. He had himself—once the suggestion was put to him—said as much. But

now the idea was absurd, even terrifying; and he was in half a mind to snatch up his bundle and run out of the house to seek his fortune elsewhere. Mr Noom was a charming and kindly old gentleman, but a moment ago he had been staring at the already dark sky with a wistfulness that made the boy quite suddenly, irrelevantly, wish to be anything but a grocer. What, then, had he wanted? What folly had set him on the road of which Noom's Stores was the logical conclusion? He had wanted a change of occupation; he had wanted to get away from the farm with its cruel mocking memories of a loveliness he would never know again; and with both his parents dead (for Mrs Pandervil had not for long survived her husband), and Sarah married, and Algernon very ready to shoulder undivided responsibility, there had remained no reason why he shouldn't follow his whim.

'Yes, sir,' answered Egg.

'Very nice, very nice.' Mr Noom rubbed his hands together still more emphatically. Between his fragments of articulate speech he made little buzzing noises. 'Yes, I remember Mr Twigg telling Mrs Noom as how . . . zzzz . . . well, that's all comfortably settled. Perseverance and industry, my boy. Zzzz. Top of the ladder. Very nice!'

'Oh, Pa!' exclaimed the girl. 'I don't believe you remember a word about it. Now who is *Mrs* Twigg, frinstance?'

Mr Noom seized his daughter by a pigtail and

drew her within reach of his arm. 'Never you mind, Miss Impudence!' he said, with his arm round her slim waist. 'You get the young man a bit of supper. Zzzz. He'll be peckish, I'll be bound.' But as soon as her back was turned, he began making conspiratorial grimaces at Egg, which Egg, after a moment's confusion, interpreted as a question.

'My sister,' mouthed Egg.

Carrie began laying the cloth.

'Of course,' said Mr Noom, in a loud voice, 'we all know that Reverend Mrs Twigg, zzzz, is the young man's sister. We know that as well as we know Mr Twigg himself, that was curate here all one blessed winter. And a hard winter too, it was.'

He smiled mischievous triumph at his daughter. She looked from one to the other, and detecting the beginnings of a grin on Egg's face she fixed him with a gaze of mock sternness. 'You've been telling, Mr Sneaky Pandervil!' The two men looked comically rueful, like little boys caught stealing apples. 'Precious pair of babies!' cried Carrie. And all three burst out laughing.

Mr Noom was the first to recover his gravity. 'Sh! Sh! Poor Mother's headache—I quite forgot it!'

Laughter was now a thousand miles away. Father and daughter exchanged an anxious glance. 'Lumme!' said the girl.' 'Is it a bad one, Pa?'

'About as usual,' said Mr Noom.

'I wonder what started it?'

'It come on at breakfast,' said Mr Noom. 'You were sweeping the shop out or something and . . . well. . . .'

Mr Noom turned away with a shrug, and Carrie invited Egg to sit down to supper. 'You must be ready for it, aren't you? Travelling *makes* a person hungry, *I* always say.'

But Egg was not deceived by this outward cheerfulness, admirably sustained though it was, as well by Mr Noom as by Carrie. The young man suspected that this quiet gaiety must be short-lived. He pictured Mrs Noom as a thin-lipped, angular, sharp-tongued woman who might at any moment appear in the doorway and destroy with one cold glance the ease and geniality of this suppertime. Meanwhile, his shyness rapidly evaporating, he tried to satisfy Carrie's curiosity about the life of a farmer. 'And then,' said he, 'there's a market every week. That's a bit of a change. Ever been to a market town, Miss Noom?' But as an undercurrent to these memories ran a dark and bitter tide. They're nice people, but I don't belong here. She's a pleasant child, but she means nothing to me, nothing. And he was suddenly filled with wonder and passionate protest that he who had once been made free of the kingdom of heaven should be sitting here dethroned and outcast, a grocer among grocers.

But now there was someone coming. The two Nooms visibly listened and waited. Light steps descended the stairs; the door opened; and there

entered a smallish, bright-eyed, and rather buxom woman of perhaps fifty.

'Well I never!' said she, in great good humour. 'Quite a party, I declare!' For one startled moment Egg wondered who this visitor could be. 'And this, no doubt,' went on Mrs Noom, advancing with smiles upon the supper-table, 'this is Egg Pandervil. And welcome, I'm sure, young man!'

Egg rose, blushing, to shake the hand which Mrs Noom extended to him across the table.

'The Reverend Twigg's brother-be-law, isn't it?' said Mrs Noom.

'Yes,' admitted Egg confusedly.

'I thought as much,' declared Mrs Noom. 'Well, and now we'll have a bit of supper together.'

She sat down at the table, and at once was in command. It was as if even the plates and cutlery obeyed her. The meal, so far from being half finished, was only just about to begin; and it was to be a meal at which only two persons, Egg and Mrs Noom, would be present. Of the others she took no notice at all, and by her seeming unawareness she contrived to annihilate them. And when Mr Noom ventured in tones of conciliation to inquire about her poor head, she turned blandly to Egg saying: 'Another bite of cheese, Mr Pandervil? Do! Just a morsel! . . . And now we've got to know each other I shall call you Egg. Just plain Egg. It's so much more homely and comfortable to my way of thinking.'

2

Egg was employed as man-of-all-work at Noom's Stores for four years, during which time he learned the names and natures of a hundred and one articles of grocery, acquired the science of weighing and the arts of sweeping and dusting, kept wicket and made an aggregate of ninety-three runs for the local cricket club (his average was two point four), grew a moustache three times and shaved it off twice, made friends with Carrie, made friends with Mr Noom, provided Mrs Noom with a cause of war, on one occasion got drunk, on many occasions thought wistfully of Mershire fields, and was not, all things considered, unhappy. There was unhappiness in him, hidden somewhere, and ready, when the hour should strike, to rise up and overwhelm him. In dreams, both by night and by day, he was haunted sometimes by sweet stinging memories of a lost Eden. But there was so much to be done in this new life that he had no time, it seemed, for the indulgence of idle regret, even had not the urgent youth in him forbidden it. Farringay offered, after all, a wider variety of interest than ever Saffron Ridge had done, and despite the determined endeavours of Blogg and Brother there remained, even at the end of the four years, a few trees, a few blades of grass, a few unviolated hedgerows, to bear witness to its unregenerate rural past and to comfort Egg's heart. In fact, for all that local patriotism might protest to the contrary, Farringay was rural still. The population, none the less, grew rapidly; for

Blogg's villas, which were the colour of raw beef, struck a note of gaiety not to be resisted by emigrants from the crowded metropolis; and the train seldom took longer than half an hour to travel the six miles. A new grocer—alarming portent—set up business in the High Street, and the post office, of which the parent-shop, Noom's, had been as it were delivered the very day before Egg's arrival, now employed a dark young lady wearing pigtails as well as the elderly yellow-haired Miss Linney who was the post-mistress. In later years it was to become possible by favour of Miss Linney to send messages speeding through wires across England, but these days were not yet. Meanwhile, by diligence and perseverance, virtues recommended, sometimes with a touch of asperity, by the amiable Mr. Noom, Egg Pandervil made himself proficient in his new duties. He could say, 'Was there anything else, madam?' or, 'And the next article, please, madam?' and, 'Allow me to send it for you!' with an intonation copied—not quite unconsciously, not quite without malice—from that of the Reverend Ernest Twigg, whose reading of the lessons had been the admiration of Miss Minnow, Mrs Pandervil, Sarah, and some others. He learned how to accommodate a pencil behind his ear, how to manage a queue of impatient customers, how to open biscuit-tins without cutting his fingers, and the price of everything in the shop from beeswax and feather dusters to Noom's Own Guaranteed Bottled Plums. He learned that if you put the cheeses near the oil-drum, someone is

certain to complain; and he learned how to make the tin of golden syrup lie down with the enamel pudding-basin. For he was an expert packer. With a deliberate care cunningly concealed under a display of briskness—smart marshalling of the purchases, smart spreading out of the paper, smart folding, smart snapping of the string—he would compose the most incongruous shapes and sizes into a golden brown-paper harmony. A dozen of matches, a bundle of firewood, a bottle of sauce, a pot of Gentleman's Relish, a roll of sandpaper, two camelhair brushes and a small tin of black enamel—such an assortment presented no insuperable difficulty to the young man at Noom's; and you could always be sure that your brown paper parcel would be provided with a little loop of string by which, at your peril, you could carry it home. Moreover at the other counter, formerly dedicated to postal affairs but now used for the sale of dairy produce, young Mr Pandervil, with sleek hair and a shining forehead, would pat and slap and weigh you up a pound of best butter at one and a penny, or half a pound of lard at fivepence, as dexterously as you could wish. Indeed, whatever he was in the privacy of his own thoughts, outwardly he became, before those four years were past, very much the smart young grocer.

During this time Egg opened his heart to no one, perhaps not even to himself. Among the local tradesmen he made acquaintances but no intimate friends. Chief among his companions were Mr Farthing the cobbler, Mr Wimmett the

ironmonger, and Mr Pummice the proprietor of that little stationery and fancy goods shop which was one of the more recent glories of Farringay. Farthing was a short, hirsute, gnomish-looking fellow who was much given to winking and nudging; it was notorious that Mr Farthing enjoyed his joke. Wimmett was sandy, through and through; his very words seemed coloured by his person—a pale drooping lily of a man always audibly wishing that he could lay his hand on a fifty-pound note. The third of the trio, Mr Pummice, was considered to be a cut above his neighbours. He possessed abnormally sloping shoulders, and always walked slightly aslant as though he were trying to squeeze himself through a narrow passage; his face, faintly suggestive of a friendly bull-dog, was excessively mobile, like indiarubber; when he spoke there was such commotion among his features that it was almost impossible to listen and look at the same time, for which reason Egg got into the habit of fixing his gaze on Mr Pummice's white stock—crowning emblem of gentility—whenever that gentleman engaged him in conversation. Speech was indeed a complicated performance for Mr Pummice. It began with a sucking-in of the cheeks, a contraction of the eyebrows, a pursing of the large mouth into a small round tunnel through which one expected a plum-stone to emerge; from these contortions words resulted, and, having spoken, Mr Pummice —if, as was his wont, he had spoken at all weightily —would smack his lips and allow his lower jaw

to drop and remain open for a moment in a very knowing manner. Small wonder that Mr Pummice was universally respected. Moreover at Mr Pummice's shop you could buy not only note-paper, sticky labels, ladies' handbags, d'oilies, anti-macassars, God is love, and macramé thread, but —if you were, in local phrase, fond of a bit of a read—the complete works of William Shakespeare in one large wretchedly printed red-bound volume, Every Man His Own Doctor, Ministering Children, The Scottish Chiefs, and the Bible. Egg could not afford to buy any of these books; but, as Mr Noom reminded him, there were several books in the house already.

With these three men, the youngest of whom was at least nine years his senior, Egg struck up something of a friendship; and the four fell into the habit of meeting once or twice a week in the bar parlour of The Green Man. Mr Pummice was fond of what he called a quiet pint of an evening; Mr Farthing frankly liked beer and good fellowship; and Mr Wimmett welcomed anything that would help him to forget his slow drift towards insolvency. Egg was drawn into their company perhaps chiefly by his loneliness, although, indeed, no matter how lively the talk or with how eager a heart he contributed to it, his loneliness persisted, so that sometimes in the very moment of throwing back his head to laugh at one of Farthing's drolleries, he—remembering what he had tried to forget—would suddenly find the taste gone out of life, and the inn and the men

and the laughter and Farringay itself would seem unreal, empty, a bitter dream from which there could be no awaking.

The attitude of these men to Egg was subtly different from their attitude to each other. Although he was their junior both in years and in status there was, in the beginning of the friendship at any rate, a hint of half-amused deference accorded to him. Once Mr Farthing, with a twinkle in his bright black eye, referred to him in his hearing as 'the young gent here'. And one day Mr Wimmett drew the eyes of all four upon him by asking of Egg: 'Now what might you have come to be a grocer for, Mr Pandervil? No doubt you had your reasons.' Egg was still too shy to be more flattered than embarrassed by these attentions, but he was nevertheless touched by them, and his heart warmed towards his companions; yes, even towards Mr Pummice himself, who, rather comically, tried by the most delicate shrugs and hints, and by turning over his very small stock of literary allusions, to establish a kind of secret understanding with Egg, an alliance as of one cut-above-his-neighbours to another. 'All the world's a stage—eh, Mr Pandervil?' he would say, accompanying the remark with a facial disturbance that was in effect a wink. And with a turn of his head he would make it clear that this fragment of English literature was for Egg's ear only, not for these others—good honest fellows enough, but they lacked, after all, through no fault of their own, the cultural advantages shared by himself

and Mr Pandervil. Egg, as near blushing as a young man of his years could well be, would as often as not turn the edge of the compliment—unwelcome and, to tell the truth, undeserved—by saying with a grin: 'Ah, Mr Pummice, we're not all such great readers as you, y'know.' Yet he liked Mr Pummice; and he liked worried, straw-coloured, hesitating Mr Wimmett; but nearest of all to his heart was little Farthing, black-browed, confiding, gay, and agreeably vulgar. Good friends though they all were and good fellows—for Pummice's snobbery was not radical in him—they never addressed each other familiarly, but were always Mr Farthing, Mr Wimmett, Mr Pummice, Mr Pandervil, wearing the courtesy title perhaps consciously, but not proudly, as the badge of their class, a badge that distinguished them alike from the lower orders as from 'the quality'.

Egg had been only nine months among them, yet was already very much at home to all outward seeming, when a movement known as Teetotalism began to reach Farringay, finding a spiritual home in the Ebenezer Chapel which devoted a week-night service to its propagation. Rumours reached the four friends of alluring entertainments, including a novelty known as the Magic Lantern, which, so it was incredibly reported by eyewitnesses, could project coloured pictures upon a white sheet.

'Very gratifying, they tell me, to the young people,' said Mr Pummice. With a plump fore-finger he whisked away the superfluous froth on his beer. 'And young Hartick has paid his tanner

and signed the blessed pledge, would you believe it!'

Mr Farthing shook his head shrewdly; then took a deep draught of ale, as if to make sure of it before the madness spread. 'That's a thing,' said he, 'as I wouldn't do! No, Mr Pummice, you don't catch me at that caper. Not if you was to go down on yer benders and arst me, Mr Pandervil, I wouldn't. Believe *me,* Mr Wimmett.'

'Best keep away,' remarked Mr Wimmett. And his friends exchanged meaning glances, remembering that Mr Wimmett was a chapel-goer. 'If only I could lay my hands on a fifty-pound note . . . I wish I could.'

His voice was edged with plaintiveness. Mr Wimmett spent much of his life in wishing. . . .

These friendships and activities formed for Egg Pandervil the kaleidoscopic background of a more private drama, which in its turn was at first shadowy and insignificant compared with the adventures and agonies of his own lonely spirit. Entering the Noom household he had felt at first like an incredulous civilian who strays by accident into the firing zone; for he became gradually aware of a mysterious battle raging around him, a battle of which there was no visible or comprehensible objective. Who was the aggressor, and who the attacked? That was no easy matter for Egg to determine. All he knew in those early days was that to himself Mrs Noom was consistently gracious, though she had, it was clear, a grievance against her husband and her daughter. He sup-

posed that it was her womanly compassion for a boy exiled from home that prompted her conspicuous kindness towards himself; or perhaps her conception of politeness forbade her to utter the criticisms which he must, he thought, sometimes provoke in her mind. Not seldom her public benevolence to him was displayed in such pointed contrast to her treatment of these others, the old man and the young girl, as to make Egg profoundly uncomfortable and vaguely uneasy, till sometimes he half-doubted whether she were not deliberately working to alienate him from all affection but her own. She praised his manners, his industry, his honesty, his skill in salesmanship, she held him up as an example even to her husband. And she would openly claim possession of him by saying, with the air of brisk geniality so characteristic of her: 'Egg's *my* boy! We understand one another, don't you make no mistake!' Often her asperities to husband and daughter were sheathed in a smile by which Egg could not help being a little charmed, and the idea that Carrie and the old man were allied against her did for a while invest her with a certain pathos. And then one day she confided to him terrible things. 'Whatever you do, Egg, don't get into mischief of that sort. Thou God seest me. Remember that. Many a promising lad's come to grief through gallivanting after girls. And not only lads, let me tell you. Not by any manner of means. Men too. Oh yes, indeed. I *know*. I name no names, but I've had something to put up with in

my day. Not that I'm breathing a word about anyone, that's not my way nor never was. I can suffer in silence, because I've learnt my lesson, and in a hard school, as the Lord well knows. White hair don't make a saint, young man; and a hypocrite's a hypocrite all the world over.' With every word she said he liked her less, though he began to feel sure at last that she was a deeply wronged woman. 'I'll tell you something, Egg Pandervil,' resumed Mrs Noom after a pregnant pause. 'I'll tell you something. When my Carrie was a tiny thing, her ma's own chick, we had a girl here, general servant she called herself, though general nuisance and general disgrace to my way of thinking. And that girl—well, I'll say no more. I'm old enough to be your mother, that I am. But I'll say no more. Them as the cap fits must wear it, and I wouldn't have some people's consciences, not for a mint of money I wouldn't. Not that he's got a conscience either if it's a conscience we're talking about. More sinned against than sinning I daresay she was, the sly cat—but that's as may be.' Mrs Noom's speech, the facile flow of her vulgarities, was without precedent in Egg's experience of her. She was excited, and the floodgates of an unsuspected garrulity were opened upon him. He guessed that in a moment, with the least encouragement, she would make a scene. She lusted after a scene. He left her abruptly, to join Mr Noom in the shop.

He was horrified by what he had heard, because it threatened to destroy the image of Mr Noom—

good, kindly, wistful, genial Mr Noom—that he had set up in his heart. He had respected and liked Mr Noom. Sometimes the old man was irritable and tiresome, tut-tutting about the shop in Egg's wake like a censorious hen after a young chicken. But even then it had been impossible to take his displeasure deeply to heart, for the rosy benevolence of his appearance could not be extinguished by a frown. Nature had cast him for a 'sympathetic' part, and he contended against Nature in vain. Surely it could not be true that this seemingly gentle creature was a man of loose life? Egg was still in the golden confusion of adolescent idealism, and the mere doubt sufficed to hurt him deeply; more deeply, perhaps than he knew. He was not overwhelmed; he maintained a kind of detachment, resolutely reminding himself from time to time: It's no affair of mine anyhow. But the unhappy thought recurred too often to be ever quite out of mind during the whole of that day; it nagged at him like a nagging tooth; and the very frequency of his protests—What's it got to do with me? No business of mine!—betrayed him into the hands of anxiety, the enemy.

Did this day-long anxiety, half-smothered as it was, contribute its iota of cause to the evening's indiscretion? Perhaps it did. He now hated Mrs Noom and doubted Mr. Noom, and it was perhaps his sense of being homeless again, of finding ugliness where he had fancied simple honest worth, that drove him back in his thoughts to the hills and

fields, the hedgerows and little lanes of Mershire, and so set aching again the old wound till it seemed that anything, any distraction, any inducement of oblivion, must be better than this throbbing misery of the mind. Not quite consciously, nor yet quite unconsciously, he gave rein to libidinous fantasies, seeking thereby to lose sight of the one beloved face whose beauty had power to pluck the heart out of him, for the censor in his mind forbade the conjunction of sacred and profane. In imagination he clipped hungrily to his arms that slim, dark-eyed, post-office girl at whom he had sometimes glanced with idle admiration. Her mouth was warm velvet under his; her supple body shuddered amorously in his embrace; she had no thoughts, no personality, no independent being, but was merely an appetite responsive to his own. His pulse beat fast; fever mounted in his cheeks; and he closed his eyes for a moment lest anyone—Mr Noom or another—should see in them the picture that they were seeing. 'I want a pound and a half of best lard, young man.' Certainly madam, prompted his mind; and his voice took the hint. It was a beastly shame to think of a respectable girl in that way, and a girl he didn't care twopence for, had hardly spoken to. A shame it was. . . . But was it? It could do her no harm; it was a dead secret; nobody knew. It wasn't as if. . . . And didn't he perhaps care for her, after all? Maybe he had been really in love with her, in a sort of way, all the time. 'And the next article, please?' Frances Hunt. I s'pose they

call her Fanny at home. Fanny Hunt. A pretty name. He began saying the name soundlessly to himself, thoughtfully, tenderly, over and over again. And when her face flashed back into his mind, he was startled to observe how extremely pretty it was. Dark eyes, a small pouting mouth, black hair recently 'put up', a straight demure nose—who could help being in love with such attractions as these! 'That'll be three shillings and sixpence halfpenny altogether, madam. Thank you very much.'

In the evening, when the shop was closed, he received permission to go out. It was an open secret that he sometimes visited the Green Man, and when mildly challenged by his employer it had been sufficient defence to invoke the name of Pummice, that good and prosperous citizen. But tonight he found, of his three friends, only Mr Farthing.

'What you doing here, Mr Farthing?' asked Egg with a grin. 'Band of Hope night, isn't it?'

'Don't talk about hope to me, Mr Pandervil. I'd rather have a drink.' Mr Farthing, having for a moment contemplated this remark of his in silence, greeted it with a smile and a nod. He seemed to see possibilities in it. He chuckled. And finally he leaned confidentially towards his companion and asked with the air of a tipster. 'See here, Mr Pandervil, what do I want with hope for? I've got something better than hope in this glass.' He winked. 'Yes, something better than hope.'

'Ha, ha!' laughed Egg. For in the past Mr Farthing had made him laugh sincerely, and would

doubtless, when fortune favoured him, repeat the benefaction; and it would have been churlish to discourage him now by failing to be amused. 'But what I say is this, Mr Farthing. Let's go to-night, you and me, and see the Magic Lantern.'

'And sing the hymns?' asked Farthing sarcastically.

'Well, what's the matter with a hymn or two? You sing 'em every Sunday, don't you, same as the rest of us.'

'I do no such thing, let me tell you. I listen. That's all.'

'Same thing,' said Egg. 'Sing or listen, it's all one.'

Mr Farthing shook a sorrowful head. 'No, squire! Not with a voice like mine it isn't.'

This time Egg forgot to laugh, his thoughts busily circling round the special reason he had for wishing to go to the Band of Hope meeting. 'Well, *I*'m going anyhow.'

So they went to the little Mission Room, offshoot of the Chapel, where they found the meeting already begun. Egg, intent on escaping from the unbearable loveliness with which memory tormented him, glanced quickly and covertly round in search of the particular distraction to which he had already in his mind half-committed himself. Yes, she was there. And yes, she was pretty. 'Where's the Magic Lantern?' asked Mr Farthing in a hoarse whisper. She was with an older woman, naturally; too much to hope that she should have been alone. Now that he saw her in

the flesh, a definite and separate person, his imagination respected her and submitted without bridling to the control he instinctively exercised over it. He approached her, in fancy, with a more timid ardour, though he was still too impatient, too urgently driven by his escaping impulse, to decide just how and when, with what words and gestures, the first advances were to be made to her. His mind overleaped the first preliminaries and carried him—impetuous steed that it was—to the moment when he should say: 'Would you mind very much if I was to call you Fanny?' He could hear his voice tremble in saying this, and he could feel his heart leap when her answer came—an answer not in words, but a shy, downcast, loving look. 'Please I want to see the Magic Lantern,' pleaded Mr Farthing in a comic, child's voice. And then he would take her hand and say—what would he say? Cruelly there came back to him that moment—peak of his existence—when there had been no need of words at all, and so with a kind of terror he raced out of his dream, back to the lighted Mission Room, which was now echoing to the strains of a four-part song rendered by two hearty young ladies and two timid young gentlemen whose heads were clustered together, like flowers radiating from one stalk, on the platform:

I'm very fond of a social glass.
And so am I!
And so am I!
It makes the time so pleasantly pass,
But it must be filled with water.

And, at Egg's side, Mr Farthing was urgently, almost desperately, nudging and winking, first preliminaries to the process known as 'sending us all into fits'. Egg grinned perfunctorily, and then with a quick glance renewed his sense of Fanny Hunt. A pretty girl . . . dark, slim . . . oh, a pretty girl, and any man would be lucky who got her. Mr Farthing was making it known to Egg, by means of silent mouthing and other facial exercises, that he proposed to return to the Green Man. 'For a social glass,' he whispered, rapturously smacking his lips over the new rich flavour this phrase had acquired. Egg shrugged his shoulders. 'Oh, all right.' Perhaps the spell of Fanny Hunt would be more powerful in absence from her. 'But we mustn't make a row,' he whispered back. Good night, Miss Hunt. Would you mind very much if . . . Good night, Fanny—dear Fanny.

In the Green Man they found, among others, Pummice and Wimmett; and Farthing won great applause by relating and imitating what had happened at the Band of Hope. Egg, though rallied from time to time for his absentmindedness—'Regular old oyster, eh Mr Pummice? Regular jolly old native oyster, what do *you* say, Mr. Wimmett?'—was left for the most part with his private thoughts. Fanny, I've been dying to talk to you. Ever since I first saw you, in the post office it was (or was it in the street? He didn't know at all), I've wanted to—well, to sort of talk to you, and tell how much I . . . Fanny, do you think that some day you might get to sort of . . . like me?

'Patience on a monument, eh Mr Pandervil?' said Pummice.

Egg smiled a vague response, his hand closing eagerly on darling Fanny's. 'Let's have another pint all round,' he suddenly blurted out, eager to atone for his silence. 'Some of that good old strong stuff, Mrs Hemp.' And after a few mouthfuls of the good old strong stuff his fancies flowed more easily and happily. Soon they were married, he and Fanny, after a short and passionate courtship. They were alone together for the first time in their little home. She was so precious to him that he couldn't leave go of her hand, couldn't stop stroking her smooth flushed cheek, and noting one by one, with quick glancing eyes, her several points of charm—items in a delicious feast. 'Well, friends, the same again all round?' But the feast was not delicious. Even here, in this dark alley of the imagination, he was pursued by that which reduced all his careful cunning make-believe to a handful of sour dust. He emptied his glass and gazed stupidly at the approach of another. When he rose to greet it, the room was filled with a faint haze through which he could see walls and furniture and men swaying in a curious and rather unpleasant manner. Being sure that his friend Mr Pummice was about to fall, he thrust out a helping hand, and then, with some suddenness, sat down. His brain cleared a little. He felt better. But now he was lying in the long cool grass of an orchard, with Monica, lovely Monica, bending over him. One instant in heaven; then, cast out and damned.

'I think I'd better be getting along back,' he heard himself say. But no one else seemed to hear him. He repeated the remark in a louder tone, and was angry to see the conversation go on, the mouths open and shut, the faces grin and sway towards each other, as though nothing had happened. He rose unsteadily, threateningly, and roared at the top of his voice: 'C-c-curse you for a lot of louts!' There was silence, an abrupt silence followed by discreet laughter. Mrs Hemp bustled forward indignantly. 'Why, Mr Pandervil, I'm surprised at you!' The truth burst in upon his fuddled intelligence: O Lord, I'm drunk! And at once he was sober.

He was sober, that is to say, as to the intelligence. Abdominally he was drunk, and he found as he lurched through the streets with Farthing as a prop one side of him, and Wimmett the other, that he had all but lost control of his legs. But at least his personality was no longer submerged; he was gloomily aware of his condition, and with the night air fanning his brow he was even clearheaded enough to begin retracing the steps that had led him into this pit of folly. To begin, but not to go on to the end; for try as he might he could not get past Monica. The night with its billowing road and reeling stars was a cup in which he tasted again —proud now to be so compelled, and a hero but for that ungovernable nausea in the stomach—the anguish of his lost love. He seized Farthing by the arm and said intensely: 'Farthing, old boy! Dear old boy Farthing! I wanta tell you about

——' But he checked the sacred name in time, and a spasm of self-disgust shook him.

They piloted him to the shop and waited with him until, in response to a timid knock, light footsteps could be heard approaching. It was very late; he had never been so late before; but not until the door was opened did he begin to consider what this escapade might mean to him. Certainly disgrace, perhaps dismissal. He heard a cheerful voice saying: 'That you Egg? Come in, do! It's cold.' Relief and gratitude took shape in the fog of his brain. It was Carrie, good old Carrie in an overcoat not quite concealing her nightdress, and a candle in her hand.

He stepped carefully across the threshold. 'Awf'lly sorry wake you up,' he said.

'Oh, I wasn't asleep. That don't matter.' Her voice was intimate, confidential, a pleasant husky whisper. 'I sat up—in my bedroom, you know, reading and what not. But I say, Egg, you're a fine old cup of tea to stay out till this time of night. You won't half catch it, I reckon, from Par'n'Ma! ... Shut the door, do! It's cold as charity.'

Something of this reached him. He shut the door with a bang. Something reached him, and he would have got it all in time; but just now a particular question was urgent in him. 'You waited up. Kind of you. Kind Carrie. Very kind.' She moved nearer to him, saying 'Hush!', and pulling at his sleeve to persuade him to hurry to bed. In the candlelight he saw a new Carrie, her familiar face—young, elfish, with a comical little

nose—touched with strangeness. He put his question. 'Thad old man, Carrie. Is he good old man, or bad old man?'

'What do you mean? Go to bed, do!'

'I mean your father. Mist' Noom. He's not a wicked rascal, is he?'

She seized him by the arm and stared up into his face. 'Oh, Egg!' she said, with grief in her voice, 'you've been drinking too much!' The forgotten candle, held carelessly, dripped grease on the floor. 'Lor! Just look at that!'

Why should she care what he did? He didn't know. But she did care; and, hating himself for what he had done, he averted his face in shame and pushed her away. Conscious of her gaze following him he made a blundering ascent of the stairs, and lurched his way into his bedroom. Safely there, he fell into a sitting posture on the bed and began drowsily watching the phantasmagoria of his thoughts.

'Egg, are you all right?' Carrie paused with her candle at his half-open doorway.

He grunted thanks, whereupon she ventured to look in.

'Can you . . . undress yourself?'

'Um.' He nodded. 'Um.'

Taking this for an affirmative, she said 'Good night!' and went away, shutting the door behind her. He was left alone with his darkness . . .

Darkness it was, and sickness, both of body and mind. He woke at some indeterminate hour of the night to find himself huddled on the floor, very

cold and still fully dressed. The darkness was heaving about him. Yet he struggled into a sitting posture, and his hands, swimming as it were through waves of cold nausea, found at last the laces of his boots. He began undressing—a difficult and tedious business. So this was what Carrie had meant. Kind Cannie. Kind Farrie. Kind Fanny. Ah, Fanny! He must keep on thinking about Fanny. And he got into bed thinking about her, a bed that at first floated round and round the room, and then up and up and up to the ceiling, but came at last to a standstill so that he fell asleep, fell into a landscape slashed with bright colours and filled with a heavenly voice, from which, fingers in ears, eyes streaming, he ran and ran to the very edge of the world. At the edge of the world he found his bed and his bedroom and the militant light of day. Someone was thumping on the door. 'It's late, Egg. Get up, do!' He sat up and stared about. A repellent heap of clothes lay on the floor. 'All right. Getting up.' The atmosphere of the bedroom was sour. Himself tasted vile. And as he washed and dressed, he tried to calculate the chances of dismissal. Was I very bad last night? Did I make a noise? And who saw me?

'Do you feel better, Egg?'

He looked, with awkward gratitude, at Carrie, who lingered, friendly and anxious, at the bottom of the stairs. It was evident that she had been waiting there to intercept him. The only friend left in this household, he thought, and more of a

sister to him, in this crisis, than his own sisters had ever been. With her hair drawn up into a bun and revealing a small ear and very pretty nape, Carrie looked very definitely a young woman, and not, as she had seemed three months ago, a schoolgirl. Excitement had changed her appearance, and her relation to Egg; the managing young person very conscious of knowing more about the business than this new assistant had given place to the admiring handmaiden. Her glance was awe-struck, as well as solicitous. Egg was already an event and might at any moment become a scandal; and he himself, although his head was aching and his brain dazed with anxiety, did not fail to read as much in her eyes.

'I'm all right now. Have they said anything about me?'

'No,' said Carrie. 'I don't think they know. Well, not everything, I mean.'

Breakfast passed without incident. He was so late that the others had left the table. For this alone he deserved grave censure, since it was part of his duty to sweep the shop out before breakfast, while Carrie was lighting fires and preparing the meal. But he was glad of his solitude because it relieved him of the bother of pretending to eat. He ate nothing. A cup of tea, very hot and rather weak, made him feel more ready to face the hazards of the morning.

He was at his post a bare ten minutes before the shop opened—unprecedented negligence. Mr Noom, bespectacled and aproned, did not look up

at his entry, but continued making calculations on the lid of a biscuit-tin with the help of a short stub of pencil the point of which he thoughtfully licked from time to time. Was it possible that the old man knew nothing, or that, knowing, he intended to overlook the offence? 'Sorry I'm late, sir,' said Egg. But he spoke so hastily and indistinctly that he was not surprised to receive no answer. The shop was opened and the customers trickled in. At eleven o'clock Mr Noom sauntered into the street, to return ten minutes later with clouded face. It's coming, thought Egg; I'm going to catch it. He felt Mr Noom's stern gaze upon him.

'Now what's the meaning of this, young man! I hope you're ashamed of yourself.'

Feeling like a little boy, Egg stammered: 'Very sorry I was late in, sir. Shan't happen again.'

He was ashamed of the equivocation even as he uttered it. Moreover it did not deceive Mr Noom.

'Late in! Late in! Don't try to trick *me!* You were the worse for liquor, sir, that's what you was. And don't think I don't know because I do know. Understand that. I do know. I know more than you think I know. I'm not a blind bat, let me tell you. Drunk you was. Shouting and brawling in a public house, and had to be carried home. That's fine goings-on for a lad in your position. You'll empty my shop for me before you done.' With scathing irony he added: 'Late in indeed!'

'Now then, Daddy!' Mrs Noom, catfooted, had glided in. 'Now then, Daddy! That's

enough and to spare. Egg Pandervil's *my* boy, and I won't have him bullied I won't."

'But *drunk*, my dear!' Mr Noom's air was half angry, half pleading. 'We're not going to have that, surely to goodness!'

'And he's said he's sorry. So that's enough. And *I'm* no friend to drink, as well you know, Richard Noom. It's a pity if you must take away my character in front of strangers. But there, it's all of a piece.'

To see Mr Noom turn away defeated, and to know himself to have been the whip that scourged him, was the bitterest punishment for Egg that could have been devised. He was uncomfortable, unhappy, and ashamed; and the new unhappiness distracted him from the old. Indeed it filled him, and grew to morbid proportions, till at last, unable bear it any longer, he launched a desperate attack upon Mr Noom's silence.

'Please, Mr Noom!'

'What is it?'

'Please, Mr Noom, you won't take any notice of what . . . of what . . . of what *she* said, will you?'

His employer stared in surprise. 'Meaning Mrs Noom?'

'Yes, sir. Mrs Noom. No call for her to stick up for me. None at all that I can see. I know I was wrong to do what I did. But it was an accident. It sort of happened.'

'I daresay, I daresay. We'll forget about it,' said Mr Noom. 'As for Mrs Noom, we'll forget

what she said too. Sometimes, you know, she says things she don't quite mean. High-spirited, gets carried away. But a better woman, let me tell you, never breathed. Ah, she's been a good wife to me, has Mrs Noom. Where I'd have got to without her I *don't* know.' He stared thoughtfully at distance, a wealth of reminiscence in his china-blue eyes. 'Things would have been different, I fancy,' said Mr Noom, half to himself, 'very, very different.' He sighed, but whether with satisfaction or with regret was more than Egg could tell. And still there seemed to be something on his mind craving utterance. 'I suppose, young Pandervil, you haven't hardly known what it is to have aches and pains?'

'Aches and pains, sir?' Egg was at a loss.

'No, of course not!' said Mr Noom hastily. 'A young feller like you. My time of life, we get these little things. When you're young you don't notice 'em. Snap your fingers at 'em. Me, I'm not so . . . so snappy as I was, that's about the truth of it. Ha ha ha! That's a good one, that is!'

There was something so wintry and desolate about Mr Noom's attempt at mirth that Egg could not forbear asking: 'Is it a special pain you're talking of, Mr Noom?'

'No, no, no, no, no!' murmured Mr Noom, the five words coming so quickly as to give almost the effect of stammering. 'Nothing special. Leastways nothing of much account. And yet . . . well yes, my boy, I'll say *rather* special. Not

special, but *rather* special.' His manner became richly mysterious. 'I'll shew you where it is.' He looked this way and that. The shop was empty but for themselves. The door into the street and the door into the private part of the house, both were shut. 'I'll shew you,' repeated Mr Noom. He laid a hand on the young man's arm. 'Step out here.' And when they stood facing each other in the middle of the shop, Mr Noom, with one last frightened look round, pointed furtively at his stomach. 'It's there,' said Mr Noom. 'No. I'm telling you a lie.' He moved his finger an inch to the left. 'It's *there*.'

'Just a pain?' said Egg, not knowing how to be sympathetic.

'Just a pain,' agreed Mr Noom, brightening a little. 'You might almost say an aching pain.'

'Is it very bad?'

'Sometimes,' said Mr Noom, 'it's worse than other times. Sharpish. Rather nasty. Other times it's dullish and nagging.' Mr Noom smiled. 'Oh, I mustn't complain. It might be a tidy bit worse, there's no doubt.'

'Does it go on always?'

Mr Noom cocked his head on one side and contemplated this question with a judicial air. 'I wouldn't say *always*,' he pronounced cautiously.

'Don't you think,' ventured Egg, ' that you ought to have a doctor?' He was conscious that the proposal was an eccentric one, for in his world, and in the Noom's, no one thought of calling in a doctor while the patient could still walk about and

pursue his calling. 'Couldn't you,' he added, anticipating a particular objection, 'couldn't you slip round and see Doctor Renwick?'

'Yes,' admitted Mr Noom. 'That might be managed. But it'd have to be mighty quick work,' he added, with something like a wink, 'for it would never do to let——'

'Of course not,' agreed Egg.

Mr Noom nodded appreciatively. 'Quite so. You're an understanding lad, young Pandervil! . . . Ah, good evening, Mrs Curtis! And what may I have the pleasure . . . ?'

The pleasure was a protracted one. When it was over, and the gratified customer gone, Mr Noom glanced intimately at Egg and asked: 'Now tell me this, my boy. You're one as keeps his eyes open. Did you ever know of a case like this before? It's just here the pain is.' He patted his stomach. 'Just here. A kind of aching pain that comes and goes. But mostly comes,' he added, with a smile. 'Did you ever meet a case like that before?' Egg shook his head sadly. 'Ah, you haven't!' Mr Noom's face fell. His rosy polished cheeks, his magnified blue eyes, were those of a crestfallen and rather frightened child. 'I thought perhaps you might have,' he said limply. The forced gaiety had vanished from his voice. He looked weary and fragile. But he rallied the next moment. 'Because if you had,' he said, eagerly explanatory, 'if you'd met a case of that kind and they'd got better, indigestion or something, well then, you see . . . ' He paused, glancing self-consciously

at the ground. Then meeting Egg's eyes again, he nodded. 'Well, well, well, well, well!' he volleyed, with brisk cheerfulness.

In the interval Egg had been turning over in his mind a plan. 'Don't you think, Mr Noom, p'raps a bit of a change ud do you good?'

'A change?'

'What I mean to say is,' said Egg, 'a holiday. Go away somewhere.'

'Leave the shop?' Mr Noom was amused and incredulous. 'What's to become of us then? Can't leave me bread and butter, can I now? And Mrs Noom don't like trains, what's more.'

'Oh, I meant alone,' explained Egg. 'I'm sure we could manage the shop, sir, between us. Just for a week or two. Do you good, it would.'

Mr Noom tried to keep calm in face of this astonishing proposal. 'Me go away for a holiday without Mrs Noom. Is that what you're saying?'

Egg admitted that it was. 'Only a few days,' he said. 'Do you good.'

'Well,' replied the old man, 'it's an idea.' His smile radiated benevolent irony. 'Takes a young man to have an idea like that. And there's only one thing against it.'

'What's that?'

'Mrs Noom'd never hear of it. You don't realize, young man, what a bond marriage is. And very right it should be. Do you know I haven't slept a night away from my wife since the day of our nuptials, as you might say, thirty years ago? And a fine thing it would be at my time of life to

go off on a holiday away from that good woman!'

But for all his protestations he was not, it seemed, inflexibly opposed to the plan. He referred to it next day in a style that was only half jocular. And Egg set his wits working to discover how the great release might be contrived. He would enlist Carrie's help. He would even, if need arose, creep into Mrs Noom's good graces again in order to prepare her for persuasion. For Egg, turning gladly away from his sick dreams, found within himself a wellspring of unsuspected energy and mother-wit. He had decided to give his brother-in-law, the Reverend Ernest Twigg, an opportunity for Good Works. Sarah—no great distance away, for had she not once visited him?—must invite Mr Noom to stay at their pleasant little vicarage at West Barnet ('And they all adore Ernest, you know!'). Mrs Noom must be tricked into giving her consent. And at West Barnet Mr Noom must consult a doctor about that little pain of his, that kind of aching pain that came and went and sometimes was worse than other times. So Egg and Carrie hatched the conspiracy, with Mr Noom, knowing something but not everything of what was afoot, growing daily more boyishly excited, more hopeful, more afraid of success.

3

When Ernest and Sarah, with Mr Noom between them, had gone off in a cabriolet—for such was their zeal that they came in person to fetch their guest, and such their magnificence that they rode

from and to the station in a cabriolet—Egg and Carrie exchanged a secret glance of jubilation. Their work of many weeks was at last crowned. What a work it had been! And how nerve-racking the fear that at the last minute Mrs Noom might change her mind and declare that she would not be left! Already there had been scenes of the bitterest recrimination. They began with her dramatic accusation, apropos of nothing and in the middle of supper:

'And so you want to leave me, Richard Noom!'

'My dear! How can you say such a thing?'

Mrs Noom uttered a scornful laugh. 'Huh! It's only what I expected. After thirty years of toil and moil I'm not as young as I was, and you want to be off. I s'pose that girl's behind it, isn't she? . . . Oh, you may shake your head, but I'm not the born fool you think me. When do you want to go, Daddy dear?'

Mr Noom, muttering into his plate, was understood to say that he had no intention of going, that nothing would persuade him to go. He was perhaps, he admitted, a bit run down, and there had been talk of a little change. 'But if you'd rather I stayed at home, my dear . . . '

'I leave it to your conscience,' said Mrs Noom.

But in the end it was she who had insisted on the visit to West Barnet, and he, with an almost bitter passion, had opposed it. Perhaps this very opposition had decided her in favour of the scheme; or perhaps it was with the intention of providing herself with a new grievance that she had finally

forced him to accept the invitation. 'So thoughtful of Mrs Reverend Twigg, Richard. And I'm sure it'll put you to rights, seeing as you're so sadly. Plump as butter, to my way of thinking, but that doesn't always signify, does it, Daddy dear!' And now, despite all his protests, Mr Noom had been packed off; and his wife, with wan smiles and an occasional long quivering sigh, from time to time came into the shop, where Egg and Carrie were both serving, and swept the scene with a mournful glance.

Supper that evening was a silent meal. The two juniors exchanged a chaffing word or two, but were careful to conceal the gaiety that bubbled within them. Mrs Noom resisted all their attempts to draw her into the conversation. But when supper was over she spoke:

'A nice pair you are to be sure! Leaving me alone on a night like this!'

'Alone? What d'you mean, Ma?' Carrie was by many degrees less deferential than her father.

'Ask yourself what I mean, miss. Thirty years of happy married life and never a parting before. And do you and the young smarty here try to make it up to me with a little bit of kindness? Not you. Sit and snigger among yourselves, that's more your style.'

'Well I never *did!*' cried Carrie, grimacing her indignant astonishment. 'Haven't we bin talking to you all supper-time! And could we get a word out of you? *That* we couldn't.'

There followed another silence, a silence more

profound than that which had preceded the storm. Presently Egg, thinking to ease the situation, began whistling *The Bells of Kilgenny;* whereupon Mrs Noom, sighing deeply, rose and left the room. Half an hour later she returned, thrust her head accusingly round the edge of the door, and said sharply: 'Carrie, I can't bear it any longer. Alone in the house with that young hooligan! You must write and tell your poor father to come home at once.'

So for a while Egg was 'that young hooligan', looked at askance, if looked at at all, and never addressed directly except to be commanded. Even Carrie was intimidated into pretending disapproval of him in her mother's presence, though in private she was at pains to shew him, by numerous little impulsive attentions, that her friendliness was in no danger of abating. And this contrast between her public and her private manner was another little secret between them; so that on the whole Egg enjoyed being 'that young hooligan' more than he enjoyed his subsequent reinstatement in Mrs Noom's favour. Several days must elapse before Mr Noom could return. Carrie delayed writing the letter of recall as long as she dared; and the post office could be relied upon not to despatch and deliver it in indecent haste. And there was time enough, in the interval, for Mrs Noom to forgive the young man for an offence he had never committed, an offence which indeed had never been defined by the accuser. After the first twenty-four hours of hostility the burden of

her complaint mysteriously changed. Hooligan he might be and doubtless was; but the real ugly truth about him now appeared to be that he was a nasty young snob who thought himself too good to be serving in a grocer's shop, and not to be wondered at neither with his sister a parson's wife and I don't know what all. Not to be wondered at, as Mrs Noom freely admitted, but a person had her rights to common civility; *and* respect, what was more, being old enough to be his mother; and though she named no names, nothing being further from her thoughts, she had heard of folks, and perhaps a person might be allowed to say it in their own house, she *had* heard of folks which their heads were swollen too big for their boots. Moreover, the argument triumphantly concluded, if some folks wasn't grocers some other folks might find themselves in difficulties. 'Don't sneer and snigger at me, young man!' cried Mrs Noom to her embarrassed victim. 'Carrie, perhaps you'd have the kindness to ask your high-class friend, Mr Pandervil, not to make game of your mother at the supper-table.' Suppertime, the only meal at which all the members of the household met without fear of interruption by the shop-bell, was the hour dedicated to Mrs Noom's exhibitions.

But on the morning of the day when Mr Noom's premature return from West Barnet was expected, Egg suddenly found himself restored in Mrs Noom's affections. Without warning and without cause she became her old gracious self to him. The change began at breakfast and became more and

more marked as the day wore on, until, by the time (late in the afternoon) when Mr Noom appeared, honey itself was not so sweet as Mrs Noom. But her sweetness was not for her husband. Mr Noom, passing through the shop with a hurried greeting to Egg, approached with every sign of eagerness the glass-panelled door leading from shop to parlour. But when he stretched out his hand towards the door-knob, the door was flung suddenly open and Mrs Noom stood there within two feet of him. Her eyes were wide and shining, shining with appreciation, perhaps, of the scene she had planned. 'Welcome home, Richard!' she cried. 'I ask no questions, mind you, where you've bin and who you've bin with. I've learnt my lesson and I ask no questions. Welcome home!' She seized him by the arms and drew him into the inner room. The door was then closed, and Egg heard no more.

He heard no more to the purpose until late that same night when the voice of Carrie, urgent and frightened at the keyhole, dragged him out of bed. 'Egg! Please get up at once!'

'What's the matter?'

'It's Ma. She's in a terrible taking.'

Egg opened the door and peered round it into Carrie's small excited face. 'Ill, is she?' Carrie gasped out a 'Yes.' 'Right-O!' he said. 'Won't be a jiffy.'

She waited outside the half-open door while he scrambled into some clothes. He could feel her waiting. And when he came out of the room she greeted him with moist clutching hands. 'She's

dying, Egg. Isn't it *awful!*' Her young body shuddered, and tears were in her voice. 'She's dying, and she wants you to read the Bible to her.' She pattered down the passage.

'Dying? How d'you know?' he whispered, following her.

And why *me* to read the Bible to her? he asked himself, pausing outside the conjugal bedroom. Neither question received an answer. 'Have you been for the doctor?' asked Egg.

Carrie was so close to him in the darkness that he could feel her warm breath on his bare throat. 'I'm going at once,' she said, 'though Ma said not to. Here, take this and go in, do!"

He felt something cold and hard being thrust into his hand. His fingers told him, in the dark, that it was shiny and black, and that it exuded a faint cold Sabbatical smell. He tapped hesitatingly upon the door of the Noom's bedroom. 'Go right in!' said Carrie impatiently. 'She sent for you, I tell you!' With that, Carrie herself opened the door and gave him so violent a push that he almost fell, black Bible in hand, into the arms of Mr Noom, who, with trousers braced over his night-shirt, rushed into the passage. And a harsh voice from the bed cried out: 'Richard, I *forbid* you to go for the doctor. Let me die in peace.' Mr Noom came back.

The room was small and murky. It contained a double bed, a yellow wardrobe, an ottoman, and a wash-stand. A chest of drawers, on which stood a mirror, had been placed with some care in front

of the window; and in front of the mirror, and reflected in it, burned a candle. The air was full of fustiness and the smell of candlegrease; and the bed was full of Mrs Noom who sat bolt-upright, grotesque in her night-dress and curl-papers, with her arms outstretched in the attitude of crucifixion, and a kind of angry exultation blazing in her eyes. She moaned and swayed her body to and fro. 'A-a-a-ah! I's like a knife! It's like a knife!'

Her husband, beside himself with anxiety yet unable after all these years to break the habit of obedience, scampered to and fro in a very frenzy of indecision. 'You hear her, Pandervil? We *must* have the doctor to her, whatever she says!'

'It's all right,' said Egg. He caught the old man by the shoulder and whispered into his ear: 'Carrie's fetching him.'

'Where's the pain, my dear?' cried Mr Noom, running to the bed again. 'We've got you safe. Tell me where the pain is.'

'It's here!' murmured Mrs Noom, clutching at her stomach.

'Ah, there!' said Mr Noom. He shot a swift significant look at Egg. 'Did you see that, my boy. It's *there*, poor thing!'

'And it's here!' cried Mrs Noom, clutching her temples. 'Is Egbert Pandervil in the room, Richard?'

'Here I am,' said Egg, coming nearer the bed. 'Here I am, Mrs Noom.'

'Ah!' She moaned again. 'Egg Pandervil! My only friend in this dreadful, dreadful house.

Will you read me a portion of the Word, please, Egg Pandervil?'

'What shall I read?'

'Read the thirty-seventh psalm, Egg . . . Ah, it's like a knife! The thirty-seventh psalm.'

Egg went to the end of the bed and stationed himself by the chest of drawers. Holding the Bible aslant, so that the candlelight should fall upon it, he began fumbling in search of the right page. His trembling fingers were reluctant to obey him. But at last he found the place and in hurried, apologetic voice he began reading: 'Fret not thyself because of evildoers, neither be thou envious against the workers of iniquity. For they shall soon be cut down like the grass, and wither as the green herb . . . '

The voice from the bed broke in upon his reading. 'Evildoers, Richard Noom. Mark that. Evildoers. Oh thank God there's one friend with me when I die. Ah, but I'll try to forgive you, Richard; deceitful trash as you are, I'll try to forgive you. You and that loose woman . . . '

Her husband, kneeling at the bedside, buried his face in his hands and murmured an inarticulate protest. 'Go on reading, Egg,' said Mrs Noom. 'Never mind this evildoer here. It's a treat to hear you read. Go on.'

Egg read on: 'Trust in the Lord and do good; so shalt thou dwell in the land, and verily thou shalt be fed. Delight thyself also in the Lord; and he shall give thee the desires of thine heart.' Imperceptibly he paused at this promise, wondering

what it could mean. But the sense of that waiting woman and that sobbing man made him hurry on; for the Bible was a holy book and there was no knowing what magic it might work. Yet as he read he became musingly aware of pictures in his mind that were more real than the tawdry scene in which he stood. There was something in these words that meant more to him than their meaning. ' . . . the meek shall inherit the earth; and shall delight themselves in the abundance of peace. The wicked plotteth against the just, and gnasheth upon him with his teeth. The Lord shall laugh at him; for he seeth that his day is coming . . . '

'Ah, yes!' cried Mrs Noom. 'Your day is coming, Richard, there's no doubt of that.'

Egg raised his voice, impatient of the interruption and eager to shout down the cruel voice from the bed: 'The wicked have drawn out the sword, and have bent their bow, to cast down the poor and needy, and to slay such as be of upright conversation. Their sword shall enter into their own heart, and their bows shall be broken.' Sick with terror and disgust though he was, the ring of these sentences recalled to him, for less than an instant, the sunlit interior of the church at home, where he had sat Sunday by Sunday, with Willy at his side, dreaming indolent and vaguely splendid dreams; it recalled, too, by what association he could not tell and did not pause to inquire, that morning in the orchard when Monica had shown him those verses —'Nor did I wonder at the lily's white . . .'— which were the only verses he had ever committed

to memory. But the drab room quickly returned to him; the spiritual squalor again assailed his nostrils; for Mrs Noom, achieving the climax of her melodrama, gave a loud scream and fell back upon the pillow. 'My death's on me. Lord Jesus, I come!'

In the profound silence that followed—for the overwrought husband seemed bereft now of the power of sound—there came a tap at the door, a tap so cool and businesslike that Egg stared across at the door in startled expectancy, almost thinking to see Death himself enter, a traditional figure with shrouded face. 'May I come in?' said a quiet unconcerned voice. And without waiting for an answer, without indeed allowing time for one, Dr Renwick walked into the room followed by Carrie. He walked straight to the bed and looked intently at the prostrate woman. When his fingers touched the pulse in her wrist she opened her eyes and glared at him malevolently. 'It's all right, Mrs Noom,' said the doctor. 'We'll soon make you comfortable . . . Pulse normal, and no fever. Where did you say the pains were?'

'Richard!'

'Yes, my dear?'

'Have you brought a doctor to see me?'

'Yes, my dear.'

'Then I'll never forgive you. You Judas!'

Unperturbed, the doctor continued his examination. 'Don't be frightened, Mrs Noom. It's rest you're needing. I'll give you something to help you sleep.' He made signs to Carrie to fetch him

a glass. 'Come, try to sit up for a moment.' With his arm round her shoulders he persuaded her into a sitting posture. 'No . . . ' He poured something from a bottle into the glass Carrie held out to him, and having taken the glass presented it to the patient's lips. Mrs Noom, with mouth firmly closed, stared hatred at him. 'Now drink a little of this.' He gave back stare for stare. A faint ironical smile curled about his lips. Mrs Noom opened her lips and drank.

The doctor turned solicitously to Mr Noom. 'No cause for anxiety at all, my dear sir. No cause at all,' he repeated with significance.'

'You mean . . . ' stammered Mr Noom, unable to believe in his good fortune, 'she's not going to die?'

The doctor laughed shortly. 'We're all going to die. What's her age? Fifty-seven? Well, I don't give her more than another thirty years . . . And now I'll get back to my bed. Good night.'

'Do you mean . . . ' said Mr Noom, following the doctor to the door, 'are you suggesting that there's nothing the matter with my poor wife?'

'Nothing at all, unless . . . ' The doctor bent over Mr Noom and whispered something inaudible to Egg.

'Daddy!' Again that screaming voice, but there was already drowsiness in it. 'If you and the doctor are plotting to put me away, let me tell you I won't have it, so there! I'm as sane as any woman alive.'

The doctor bowed to her. 'Then your only pos-

sible excuse is denied to you, madam. Good night.'

The door closed on the departing doctor, and on Carrie who went to escort him downstairs. Mrs Noom, with a sigh, nestled into her pillow and in a few minutes was asleep. Her husband, moving stealthily, seated himself in a chair at the side of the bed and made ready for a night of vigilance.

'Won't you try to get a bit of rest!' whispered Egg in his ear. Mr Noom shook his head sadly. 'There's my bed if you care to have it. I'm going to stay up now I am up.' Mr Noom shook his head still more emphatically. 'He said there was nothing the matter, you know,' urged Egg.

In response to this final appeal, Mr Noom's benevolent features were twisted into a shape of scorn and wrath. 'That fellow!' he whispered hoarsely. 'He doesn't know what he's about. And he's no gentleman. Good God, Pandervil, he tried to make me believe the poor woman was shamming, and her in such terrible pain!'

Egg, afraid to say more, tiptoed his way out of the room and went downstairs. In the kitchen he found a lamp lit, an oil-stove burning, and Carrie.

'Is she asleep?' asked Carrie. He nodded. 'Then we may as well make ourselves comfortable. I'm glad you've come down. Myself, I can't sleep after all that set-out.'

Egg stood over the stove, warming his hands. 'Why is she such a beast to him?' he asked. 'Why is she such a rotten beast? Does she hate him?'

Carrie shrugged her shoulders. 'Huh! She loves him. Like a dog loves a bone she loves him.

He's been away for a day or two, so he's got to be paid out for it. That's all it is.'

Habitual ways of thought made Egg say to himself: What a way for a girl to speak of her mother! He was a little shocked, for it seemed wrong to him that Carrie should criticize her mother as freely as he did, a mere stranger. Another thought came, and he expressed it feelingly. 'If I was married to a woman like your Ma, Carrie, I just wouldn't stand it. Your father's too easy with her by half. If it was me I'd walk out of the house and never see her again.'

Carrie looked at him thoughtfully. 'I daresay you would.' After a pause she added: 'But you don't know Ma.'

It was true. He didn't know Ma. There were, indeed, many things that Egg, at twenty-four, didn't know.

4

Time passed slowly in Farringay, because, although there was much to occupy Egg, both in the shop and out of it, life had become for him nowadays a series, superficially, of repetitions. He never, happily for himself, became fully and continuously aware of repetition, never observed with disgust or dismay how like one day was to another, and how week followed week like a row of impressions made by the same rubber stamp. He did not observe this, because such observations were not part of his mental habit; he could not have

observed it because, indeed, it was not, in any fundamental sense, true. True as it might have seemed to a clearsighted but unreflecting spectator, the very existence of Egg, in whom everything but his own indestructible identity was incessantly however subtly changing, availed to prevent its being so. The fingers of time were never idle upon him; they took his plastic form, and, with a caress here, a thrust there, they secretly and imperceptibly remodelled him. His mind to its old store added multitudinous images gathered from the new environment, experienced sensations, needing only utterance to make them thoughts, that rose out of the ceaseless chemical action going on inside him between past and present. In Farringay things seemed always much as usual. The village continued more and more resolutely to affiliate itself to the great metropolis six miles distant; the beneficent Blogg (and Brother) continued to build his rows of villas; more shops sprang up, and competition became keener; there was talk of a local theatre; Mr Pummice continued to quote, and to attribute fragments of Longfellow, Mrs Hemans, Isaac Watts, Martin Tupper, and others, to 'the Bard of Avon'; Mr Farthing continued to despise Teetotalism and all its works; and Mr Wimmett continued to wish that he could lay his hand on a fifty-pound note. At Noom's, life ran in its accustomed grooves. Mr Noom, save on the subject of his wife, from time to time opened his heart to Egg; Egg, though his affections were ungrudgingly bestowed, kept his own heart closed; Carrie

remained as dependable and cheerful and managing as ever; and Mrs Noom, who breathed melodrama as her native element and was never herself without it, continued, in obedience to the law of self-preservation, manufacturing that element in all places and at all seasons. Everything was the same except—and the exception, however trite, is great enough to rob the statement of significance—except that everyone was growing older.

Further afield more obvious changes were taking place. The Ridge Farm, Egg heard, had changed hands, and the Pandervil family was scattered to the four points of the compass. Flisher had become the third wife of Sam Reddick the dairyman, who was fifteen years her senior; Martha was employed as nursemaid in the pretty rural district of Muswell Hill; Jane, still a child, was once more under the care of sister Sarah; and Jinny Randall had been romantically met, and seized, and married, and translated to Manchester, by a commercial gentleman named Glover who happened, in the course of his duties, to pass through Keyborough. And what of Algernon himself, by whom these events were reported? The choicest fate of all had been reserved for Algernon, who seemed to have blossomed into a luxuriant and exotic growth since the removal of his parents' authority and his brother's innocent competition. It appeared that his bit of schooling had, as he said, come in useful. He had been taken on as a clerk by no less a personage than Mr Fox, of Fox, Fox, Fox and Nephew, the leading auctioneer in Mercester, and was rapid-

ly, if his own account were to be trusted, climbing high into favour with his employers. Fast following his letter came Algernon himself, eager, after a lapse of two years, to see, as he said, young Egg again.

Whatever changes the years had wrought in Egg were neither conspicuous nor unexpected; but Algernon they had re-created, filling out his person (always a plump person), giving an air of importance to his carriage, enriching his voice with the deep velvet tones of self-satisfaction, and leaving only so much of the old Algernon as to make it demonstrable that this was indeed he and no impudent, well-fed, plausible impostor. Having sent warning of his visit, he secured—and by post, without requiring his brother's intervention—a room at the Green Man. And there, wearing a magnificent check suit, a crimson waistcoat, and a stock that was fully the equal of Mr Pummice's, he received and entertained young Egg. He was wonderfully genial and benevolent. His voice boomed, and he went on shaking Egg's hand so heartily, so long, and with such ample pumping movement, as to cause some little embarrassment to the recipient of this honour. 'Well, old man,' said Algernon, 'and how's things with you? I hear from old Sarah that you're getting along famous. In business, I mean. Bray-vo, *Eggie!* Nothing like business, is there? Ah, nothing.' Egg, unfeignedly glad to see his brother, was hypnotized into attempting an imitation of this bluff cordiality. But it was Algernon who did

most of the talking. Algernon, to do him justice, was pleased with the world, with Farringay, with the quality of his accommodation, with Egg, no less than with himself. He described nearly everything that was shewn him, nearly every piece of news that Egg gave him, as 'capital, capital, old man'. He was very free, too, with diminutives. 'I shouldn't wonder, old man, between you and me and the feather bed, I shouldn't wonder if there wasn't a nice little partnership coming the way of yours truly before many moons are out, as they say.' In one of the less frequented lanes of Farringay he interrupted Egg's answer to an urgent question of his own in order to give a performance in his best auctioneering style. In two minutes he sold a score of sheep at extravagant prices. It was his own opinion, 'though I don't go in for chucking bowkays at myself, old man,' that he could get the bids, and take the bids, and keep the patter going, as smart as any fellow in Mercester; and Egg, who found difficulty in distinguishing one word from another of his brother's passionate professional gabble, warmly agreed that it must be so. 'I don't say,' said Algernon, 'that I haven't had a nice little bit of practice, for that would be telling you a lie. And practice, as they say, makes perfect. I daresay you've found that out in your business, old man.' And just as Egg was making yet another desperate attempt to describe the life of a grocer Algernon burst in with: 'Yes, I know, old man. Jolly interesting it must be. Only too glad to see you settled and

that's a fact. As for me, I've got a nice little billet and I don't mind admitting it. What's more—' He smiled and winked and unconsciously expanded his chest before leaning close to his brother's ear to say confidentially: 'What's more, Egg old son, there's a certain little woman out Flaxted way. Nothing settled yet, of course. Time enough for that when that little partnership comes along. But I fancy we understand one another. Trust *me*.' At the end of his brief visit, Algernon repeated with augmented enthusiasm the pumping operation that had signalized his greeting. 'Well, all the best, old man,' he said. 'It's been nice to see you and talk over old times. Bye bye, boy!' Algernon's visit was perhaps the most highly coloured incident that occurred during the drab period that followed Mrs Noom's deathbed performance.

Meanwhile that alien life in Mr Noom, to which his 'rather special pain' bore witness, was doing very nicely indeed, and at Mr Noom's expense. In fact it had by now become evident—to the doctor, to Egg, and to Mr Noom himself not least—that there was not room in the world for both of them. In short, Mr Noom's little pain was killing Mr Noom. An operation was out of the question, for, even had Dr Renwick been able to anticipate the methods of Lister, any attempt at surgery must have killed the sufferer outright. Without it he might have the good luck to live for many months in torment such as a man would be sent to prison for allowing a dog to endure.

But there existed no special society for the prevention of cruelty to old gentlemen, so Mr Noom, having finally taken to his bed, continued, with sobs and animal grunts and screaming invocations of his God (a reticent personage), to advertise from time to time the sanctity of human life. Dr Renwick did all, within the law, that he could, and for the last few days of existence Mr Noom was comparatively comfortable, being conscious for not much more than an aggregate of one hour during each twenty-four, and for that hour too weak to suffer acutely. Mr Noom's vitality, the unsuspected strength, as of youth itself, which, surviving in his old body, had cruelly insisted on fighting the intruder to the last ditch, was now all but spent. Things had reached the stage when it is permitted to hope, almost in so many words, that the end will come soon. Again and again Egg would steal to the door of the room and glance towards the nurse with an eager question forming on his lips. Again and again she would sadly shake her head. It goes on and on, thought Egg. On and on. It's too much. It's wicked. But he himself had the shop to attend to; that was the best he could do for Mr Noom, and it was, he felt, nothing at all. He was glad when Carrie, against her wish, was sent to spend her evenings and nights at a neighbour's house; that had been Dr Renwick's counsel. And if he had had an emotion to spare it would perhaps, a little of it, have been spent on Mrs Noom, who, having worn her scepticism threadbare and indulged her

scorn of Dr Renwick to the utmost degree, could no longer disguise from herself that she was about to be widowed. At last, at last, her Richard was escaping from her. Indefatigable in her devotion now, she was yet visibly consumed with jealousy of the nurse, finding it intolerable that during these last few weeks, with her lust for possession at its height, she must take second place to this smooth-faced hussy in uniform. The doctor and the nurse were so clearly, she said, conspiring to oust her from her rightful position as lawful wedded wife. Egg sometimes, for the sake of distraction, tried to guess what was going on in the private mind of this inexplicable woman. Life had now thrust upon her a part grandiose enough, in its anguish and terror, to satisfy even such a passion for melodrama as hers; and if she overacted the part—well, that was hardly to be wondered at, and it did not mean that she was not suffering her share of the fear and pain that vibrated through the household. No doubt she was bewildered, even frightened, to find that events, and Richard Noom in particular, would no longer submit to her management; and perhaps it was not her fault, but rather an accident of temperament, that she so often had the air of implying that this disease of Mr Noom's was a piece of gross insubordination on his part which she could never bring herself to forgive him. At long last, after a lifetime of unexampled marital docility, Mr Noom was doing something without her permission: he was dying.

On the last morning Mr Noom rallied a little, emerged for a while from the drug-dimmed nightmare of his life and was able to indulge in some quiet fragmentary conversation. His wife was with him. He asked for Carrie, and, a moment later, for Egg. The nurse, slipping from the room, brought these messages to Egg in the shop. A customer volunteered to fetch Carrie. 'Will he get better then?' asked Egg of the nurse. She shook her head. He followed her upstairs.

'Morning, Mr Noom!'

'Hullo, my boy!' Mr Noom smiled beatifically, a child's smile. 'Do you know,' he said, in a small, remote, hesitating voice, 'I feel wonderful better this morning. Soon be out and about again. Hey, nurse?'

Mrs Noom, seizing his hand, began to weep. 'Have you been happy with me, Richard?' she wailed. 'Say something to your wife.'

The nurse, pushing her aside without ceremony, smothered the question by saying, with a swift smile: 'You do me credit, Mr Noom. I've never had such a good easy patient before.'

Mr Noom, vaguely and uncertainly, smiled back at her. 'Where's my Carrie?' he asked after a pause.

'I think I hear her coming,' said Egg. There were quick footsteps on the stairs. 'That's her, I bet.'

Mrs Noom stood rigid at the bedside. Her glance of hatred travelled from face to face. Egg, shocked into staring at her, shuddered in the act

of conjecturing what mighty and implacable passions were flaming behind that mask. These were strangers, she seemed to be thinking, thrust between her and the man, her own man, whom she was seeing alive for perhaps the last time. And now they proposed to bring yet another on the scene, a girl, this Carrie. Perhaps in that galling moment of defeat—for indeed we must make what excuses we can for her—she crazily confused Carrie with another young woman, the wench whom once, a quarter of a century ago, in the scullery, Mr Noom had kissed. But this was not in Egg's mind; his thoughts and his eyes were on Mrs Noom herself, who, suddenly, relaxing the stiffness of her attitude, swooped like a hawk to the bed and whispered, eyeing her husband fixedly: 'Don't see her, Daddy! Tell her to keep away till you're better!'

The light went out of Mr Noom's face. He stared perplexedly at her bright eyes, now so near his own. From the passage outside came the sound of a hesitating step, and then a little cough of nervousness.

'Quick! Say: "Another time, Carrie!" say: "Don't come in!"'

'Carrie?' repeated Mr Noom questioningly. His lip quivered. Reluctantly he met his wife's look, and he seemed to understand what he read there. 'You tell her, my dear.' His eyes closed in weariness, and quickly Mrs Noom glided to the door in time to intercept Carrie's entry. She closed and locked the door, and came back, almost smiling to

the bedside. The nurse with gentle fingers was now stroking the pain-crumpled face on the pillow; in her other hand she still held the hypodermic needle. Egg had seen and heard everything. He had seen and heard more than he could bear to remember, and his heart ached with a question. Why had the old man flashed that signal to his merciful sister? Had it been indeed a return of bodily pain, or an agony more exquisite, more subtly cruel? . . . And now Mr Noom, his face twitching no longer, was drifting quietly into sleep. He slept for nine hours, and did not wake again.

5

The day after the funeral, a singular orgy which seemed to give general satisfaction, Mrs Noom took to her bed and remained there, magnificent in sorrow, for a week; and Carrie was kept busy all day long running up and down stairs in a hopeless endeavour to satisfy all her mother's demands. This additional burden, though it fatigued the girl, helped to distract her from grief; and she herself, spending a quiet evening in the kitchen with Egg, audibly thanked God for Mrs Noom's voluntary sequestration.

'It's nice and comfy here, int it?' said she.

'Um,' answered Egg, affirmatively, and went on reading. He was reading a work (for the Use of Schools and Young Persons) entitled *Goldsmith's Geography*, the flyleaf of which bore an inscription, in faded ink: *To our dear nephew Richard*

Noom for his 21 *birth-day, from Uncle and Aunty Bunce, Jany,* 1815. *The lips of the wise disperse knowledge: but the heart of the foolish doeth not so. Proverbs xv.* 7. It was not perhaps precisely the reading he would have chosen, but of the fourteen books that comprised Mr Noom's library this was the only one he had never before looked at. And indeed he was enthralled by it, for its very existence proved that there were other places in the world than Farringay. He had just reached a reference to certain 'enormous mirrors, the costly donations of infidel kings', which the reverend author had observed in the Sultan Mother's Chamber of Audience at Constantinople. In those mirrors Egg saw himself reflected. He was translated into a world of strange splendour. And presently he came upon this magical sentence: 'These mirrors the women of the Seraglio sometimes break in their frolics.' Under the spell of this incantation he allowed the book to fall into his lap, and to lie there unregarded, while he stared at the little red heart of the kitchen-grate and in opulent day-dreaming lost all sense of his surroundings, all memory of dark and mortuary things. Enticing pictures danced in his mind, and for a while he surrendered himself drowsily to their queer wicked charm. For so many days he had dwelt on death, and on death in those viler aspects which the horrific pomp of burial had made conspicuous, that now, with all the impetus of reaction, his thoughts made holiday and disported wantonly in the oriental palace of his fancy. A

falling cinder roused him, and he glanced towards Carrie. At once his mood changed. Poor Carrie! She looked inexpressibly forlorn. Tears glistened on her lashes, glistened and swelled and tumbled on to her young pallid cheeks.

He leaned forward and touched her knee. 'Cheer up, Carrie!'

The smile with which she responded hurt him even more sharply than her tears had done. A warm protective impulse woke in him. He got out of his chair and came near to her, placing a hand on her shoulder. She was not, perhaps, a pretty girl; but to-night she seemed touchingly young. She, like himself, was lonely. For her, as for him, the future was an inscrutable grey mystery.

At his touch she looked up at him with swimming eyes. 'Oh Egg!'

'Cheer up!' he said again. 'I'll take care of you, you know.' His fingers, without instructions from himself, touched her throat, involuntarily making a cup for her chin to rest in.

'Oh Egg!' she said again. 'Do you mean . . .?'

What did he mean? Something in his mind shouted Danger! He ignored the shout. 'I mean,' he said, lamely, 'well, that I'll . . . take care of you . . . if you'll let me.'

His free hand found itself to be free no longer; moist warm fingers were entwined with his own. Carrie closed her eyes, as if they were saying too much, and nestled closer into the curve of his arm. What she was thinking he did not know,

but her mouth was waiting to be kissed, and he, alas, wanted to kiss it. Events were sweeping him off his feet, and, despite a pang of fear, in his unwonted excitement he could not altogether regret that the tide must prove too strong for him. He lost sight of what he dreaded—if indeed he sighted it at all—in the hungry contemplation of what he wanted. It was too late now to draw back. At his protesting rational self he shouted, half joyously, half in despair: Too late, too late! And his lips sought and found their desire . . . After a moment of proper maidenly passiveness, Carrie gave him back kiss for kiss. She was not a pretty girl. She was Carrie, commonplace and familiar. It was not she that he wanted (ah, forget that, forget!) but . . . her kisses were fresh and sweet; they, and not she herself, excited him, so that he constrained her out of the chair and put his arms eagerly about her. And as he held her close it suddenly and shockingly flashed into his mind that under this prim woollen frock, under that stiff corsetting, was a warm and naked body. The women of the Seraglio! He was affrighted by his own wickedness, and in hasty reaction from it he released Carrie, and drew away from her, his mind full of shame and doubt and half-formed questions. This crude desire and this honest unexcited affection that existed, not fused in love, but separately and (he feared) alternatingly—could this mean the end of his long aching loneliness?

And now, what was he to say to her. 'Are you . . . all right, Carrie?'

'Yes, dear.' Carrie was affectionate but decisive. 'You're all rumpled. Let me put you to rights.' She stepped up to him, frowning critically, and with busy fingers pulled his collar and tie into their proper shapes. Uneasily submitting to these ministrations, he glanced askance at the wild creature that had stood in his shoes a moment before and delivered him, body and soul, into captivity. But the next moment she had melted again and was saying, snuggling close to him: 'Oh Egg, isn't it nice! I've never had anyone of my very own before. Even . . . even Daddy . . . well, I mean I had to sorta share him, didn't I? But I've got you, haven't I!'

'You bet!' said Egg.

'I've got you all to myself, haven't I!' It was not quite a question, but undoubtedly it demanded an answer.

'Well,' said Egg . . . The orchard blossomed; the moon rose in the summer sky; a black pit gaped to receive him . . . 'Well what do *you* think?' said Egg, pretending to tease her. And lest more questions should come out of it, he again, quickly, covered her mouth with his own. And, say what he might, there was a certain comfort in that. Captivity had, perhaps, its consolations.

'My!' exclaimed Carrie, not without complacency, 'you *are* a one for kissing, I *must* say! No, you must be good for a change!' A thud-thud-thud was heard overhead. 'There's Ma banging away again. Oh, bother her!'

Kissing Carrie, if less than a passion, was something more than a pastime. If it failed to intoxicate him, it at least seldom failed to dull his ears to the whispers that followed him from the past. The next day he contrived many occasions for being alone with her, and she had wit enough not to seem to seek them. Mrs Noom was still ignorant of the dramatic and drastic change in their relationship. Carrie did not lack courage, but she preferred not to provoke the inevitable quarrel until her mother was downstairs again. She had not long to wait, for at tea-time, looking none the worse and none the better for her lying-in-state, Mrs Noom appeared. But during the meal Carrie did not feel equal to announcing that she 'had got a young man', and, after all, as she remarked to the young man himself, good news would keep. 'Won't it, dear!'

Carrie kept her good news until the surprising, the exciting, the utterly unlooked-for visit of Mr Sparks, the aged solicitor of Farringay, who finally introduced himself to Mrs Noom three minutes before closing-time. This was clearly a parlour occasion; so in the cold parlour instead of in the warm kitchen Mr Sparks was received. He seemed —said Carrie afterwards, to Egg—impatient to begin his business, as though, at his time of life, he had no time to spare in merely sociable exchanges. As Carrie was leaving the room he glanced at her over the rim of his spectacles and said, with a touch of asperity: 'I shall want you,

young lady. Miss Noom, I believe? Caroline Noom?'

'That's me,' said Carrie.

The lawyer coughed. 'What I have to say concerns you, as well as your mother.'

'Indeed!' exclaimed Mrs Noom. ('You should have seen the look she give him!' said Carrie.)

'I'll fetch Mr Pandervil then,' remarked Carrie. 'For what concerns me,' she added proudly (if her own account is to be trusted), 'concerns Mr Pandervil too.'

When all three were seated in a row before him, Mr Sparks cleared his throat and remarked coldly, with a slight bow to Mrs Noom: 'The late Mr Richard Noom, a few weeks before his lamented decease, made a will. Of that will I hold a copy in my hand. First of all, Mrs Noom, and, ah, Miss Noom, I must apologize for the fact that these necessary details reach you several days later than they, ah, should have reached you. The fact is, ah, I have been ill in bed, and my subordinates, feeling this to be a matter of some delicacy, did not care to handle it in my, ah, absence. I do not agree with them.' Mr Spark smiled grimly. 'I have, indeed, forcibly expressed myself in a contrary sense.'

There was a pause. Mr Sparks rustled his papers. Mrs Noom spoke.

'Mr Noom made his will years ago. On his wedding day it was. If you tell me he's been and done something behind my back, well I don't believe it, Mr Sparks, lawyer or no lawyer, for a

person has their rights,' said Mrs Noom. 'And their feelings too,' she added, with an ominous sniff.

'Allow me to point out——' began the lawyer.

'Never a cross word in thirty years,' said Mrs Noom.

'Proceeding to the terms of the will,' resumed Mr Sparks, without apparent emotion, 'I shall, if you will permit me, briefly summarize them. The testator gives and bequeaths the whole of his property of whatsoever description to his dearly beloved and only daughter Caroline for her sole use and benefit, *except*,' said Mr Sparks, with a certain sonorous unction, 'except as hereinafter provided. Which is to say, that the said Caroline is straitly charged to succour support and maintain with all due care and in a reasonable state of comfort, well-being and security, Georgina Noom, née Huggins, the dearly beloved wife of the testator . . . That seemed to me,' said Mr Sparks, with a sudden access of cheerfulness, 'to need and require a certain measure of definition. I ventured to advise, therefore, a rather more specific provision, to which, I am happy to say, the testator was persuaded to give legal effect. Here it is.' He stopped to wipe his spectacles on a silk handkerchief. 'Here it is. In the event of the said Georgina Noom electing to share the house and home of the said Caroline Noom the said Georgina Noom is to receive the sum of ten pounds per annum. But in the event of her not so electing the said Georgina Noom is to receive, ah, a some-

what larger sum, to be paid to her by the hands of the testator's solicitors, Messrs Henry Sparks & Company. The sum, in short, of fifty-two pounds per annum. This means, madam, that you have a first charge on the profits of the business, of which your daughter is now the proprietress.'

'Thank you for nothing,' said Mrs Noom.

'Further, it is my duty, I think, to point out to you that it might, in certain circumstances, be to your advantage to leave your daughter's roof. On the other hand . . .'

'Rest easy, Mr Sparks!' Mrs Noom's voice was gall itself. 'I shall stay.' She closed her mouth with a snap. 'And what,' cried Mrs Noom, turning savagely on her daughter, 'what's between you and this young smarty here, Miss Creepy Crawly? Sneaking round your poor Pa and poisoning his innocent mind against his own wife!'

'If you're referring to Mr Pandervil, Ma,' said Carrie, with a toss of the head, 'well, I'm going to marry Mr Pandervil, that's all about it . . . Yes, Ma, I mean it. I'm going to marry Egg and take care of him, and he's going to look after the business for us, and we shall all be as comfy as you please. Shan't we, Egg?'

Egg saw with dismay that Carrie was five years older than the girl he had kissed yesterday, and that the commanding gesture with which she challenged the future might almost have been her mother's.

CHAPTER THE FOURTH

CARRIE

I

At eleven o'clock on a Monday morning, some seven years after the death of Mr Noom, there was great excitement in Farringay; but, for all that we know to the contrary, it was almost entirely confined within one breast: that of Mr Farthing, who stood, hands in pockets, pensively jingling his keys and coppers, in the doorway of Noom's Stores. Mr Farthing, whose features now peeped through a forest of black beard, had come to make a small purchase and to pass the time of day with his neighbour Mr Pandervil, but at the moment he was doing neither of these things: with his back to the shop, shutting out the morning sunlight, he stared in a kind of melancholy fever at the work of demolition going on across the street, where workmen, with complete disregard of Mr Farthing's feelings, were destroying that fifty yards of ancient red-brick wall which had given the High Street its peculiar distinction, its character, its onesidedness. The housebreakers worked without haste and without pity, like time itself; they had a long job before them, for there was old Mrs Bartlett's tumbledown cottage as well as this wall to be removed. A stubborn old lady

with a strange whim for dying in the house she had been born in, Mrs Bartlett had for many years opposed modern progress by the simple expedient of not hearing anything that was said to her and by being unable to read or write. But she had at last vacated her cottage—just the place, said Mr Catch, for a nice butcher's shop—and moved into an even humbler lodging in the churchyard; and Squire Oaks—as this more formidable obstacle was still called by the older inhabitants of Farringay—had got himself into financial difficulties from which only the sale of half of his estate could extricate him. The peasant's death and the Squire's fall had been Farringay's great opportunity; and Farringay, in the person of Blogg and Brother, had been quick to see and to seize it. Mr Blogg, as everybody allowed, did a smart deal; he first bought the land from Mr Oaks and the cottage from Mrs Bartlett's heirs, and then, having worked up a tremendous agitation for the broadening of the High Street, generously sold part of what he had bought to the District Council, of which, by a touching coincidence, he happened to be chairman. The land of which Farringay became thus possessed was called 'accommodation land', a phrase that explained, to everybody's satisfaction, why Mr Blogg had been compelled to charge for half his purchase ten times as much as the whole of it had cost him six months before. And now Farringay was to have a splendid High Street, and everybody was rubbing his hands with pleasure in the

prospect, except, among Egg Pandervil's acquaintances, Mr Farthing. For Mr Farthing was a sentimentalist. Useless to talk to him of Farringay's future glory; he was mourning the destruction of her past. Worse than useless to urge upon him that the High Street would be improved out of all knowledge, for that was precisely the kind of improvement which Mr Farthing most bitterly disliked and feared.

And so he stood brooding in the doorway of Egg's shop. 'I don't like the look of that, Mr Pandervil,' he said presently, half turning. 'Not a bit I don't.' Receiving no answer he said: 'What's your way of thinking?'

Egg, from behind his counter, nodded indifferently. 'Seems a pity, p'raps. But if they *will* 'ave it, let 'em! It won't keep *me* awake of nights.'

'It'll be omnibuses next week,' said Mr Farthing bitterly.

'Omnibuses?' exclaimed Mr Pandervil. 'Omnibuses next week! First I've heard of it.'

'Next week or next twelvemonth, it's all one,' said Mr Farthing. 'They'll come, mark my words. *And* soon, what's more.'

With his back to Egg he stood for another five minutes in complete silence. Then he remarked suddenly: 'Well, I mustn't stand here chatting all day!' And he set off down the street.

In ten seconds he was back again. 'Nearly forgot. The missus wants a bit of bundle-wood, Mr Pandervil, if you'll be so obliging.'

'Pleasure, Mr Farthing.'

Mr Pandervil tendered the bundle-wood, and Mr Farthing received and paid for it with a formal courtesy of which each was both conscious and proud. It is in this style, they were both thinking, that buying and selling across the counter should be conducted; subtly, without a word said, they affirmed the dignity of retail trade. And Mr Pandervil, enjoying the piquancy of the moment, shewed a nice discrimination in not saying, as it was on the tip of his tongue to say: 'May I send it for you?' For that would have been overdoing it. An artist knows when to stop.

The transaction over, they were old friends again. 'Well, I'll be bowling my hoop,' said Mr Farthing.

He meant, and was understood to mean, that he was going. With this preliminary the two friends settled down to a little quiet conversation.

'How's the olive-branches, Mr Pandervil? Sprouting and shooting and puttething forth leaves in their season, hey?'

'Mustn't complain,' said Egg. 'Mabe come over queer yesterday, but she's all right again 'smorning. It's my belief she eats too much for a child of her age. Why, when *I* was five . . .' The gleam of false reminiscence visited his eyes, to be extinguished next instant by the cloud of a genuine and recent memory. 'Young Bobbie 'ad quite a bit to say for 'imself last night. Up half the night I was, with bottles and dill-water and I don't know what all.'

Mr Farthing nodded. 'I know. I bin through

it, Mr Pandervil. And shall again, I shouldn't wonder. Well'—he moved reluctantly, a few steps nearer the door—'this won't mend the parson's boots, will it!' He nodded farewell, and stood irresolute.

'It's a dry day, to be sure,' said Mr Farthing presently. 'And I should hate a glass of beer,' he added wistfully.

'Jest a minute, Mr Farthing!' said Egg.

Mr Farthing came back to the counter. 'What! Did I leave me bit of bundle-wood after all!'

'So you did,' Egg laughed nervously. 'I hadn't noticed. Fancy that! There was something I wanted to ask you, Mr Farthing. A sort of a bet it is that I've got on with someone. Now if you saw the word *honourable* front of someone's name, same as it might be "the Honourable John Smith", frinstance. Now what would you say that meant?'

Mr Farthing looked thoughtful. 'Members of Parliament,' he suggested. 'Aren't they honourables?'

'Ah, p'raps you're right!' exclaimed Egg, affecting enlightenment. 'It's of no importance, you know. Just a bit of an argument I had; that's all. One said one thing and one said another. So we sort of bet on it.'

'Jusso,' agreed Mr Farthing. 'Well . . .' He nodded again, and this time the departure was achieved.

Left to himself Mr Pandervil stood for some while resting his hands on the counter and staring at that oblong of blazing brightness, the doorway.

In his shirt-sleeves, and aproned, he looked precisely what he was—a grocer in a small but comfortable way of business. From his appearance and demeanour it could not have been guessed that his father had written a book so learned and so dull that no one had ever been persuaded to publish it, and that he himself in his time had ploughed and sown and reaped a hundred acres and assisted countless labouring sheep to deliver their lambs one stage nearer the slaughter-house; nor could it have been guessed that he was not the king of this particular castle, Noom's Stores, but only the consort of its queen. To all appearance he was an ordinary enough grocer. But his behaviour during the next five minutes was anything but ordinary. First of all, awaking from his dream, he glided quickly to the glass-panelled door of the parlour and peeped in. Satisfied with what he saw, or did not see, he walked across the shop and closed the street door, so shutting out the radiant summer. Finally, he removed the lid from a biscuit tin, and, standing with his back to the window, held this improvised mirror in front of his face and stared with intense and mournful curiosity at the vague reflection it gave back to him. He saw, dimly but indubitably, the lines of resignation that pencilled his forehead, and the russet muttonchop whiskers that altered so oddly the character of his face; and by a queer trick of memory he suddenly recalled that moment—the night Sarah betrothed herself to Mr Twigg, was it twelve years ago, or more?—when he had scrutinized himself in the bedroom

mirror at home, with Algernon watching him perplexedly from the bed.

The shop-bell tinkled. 'Morning, Mr Pandervil!'

He was caught, the lid of the biscuit-tin still in his hand, still raised at a significant angle. 'How d'ye do, Mr Wimmett! All the neighbours coming to see me this morning! Had Mr Farthing here only a minute ago.'

Mr Wimmett eyed his friend in surprise. 'Whad you doing with that thing, Mr Pandervil? Cut yourself with it or suthing?'

'No, not exactly cut myself,' said Egg. 'Do you know, these bits of tin they haven't half got a shine on 'em. Never noticed it before. See, Mr Wimmett—dash me, you can see your face in 'em . . . And what can I do for you this morning?'

Mr Wimmett's manner became curiously hesitating and confidential. His willowy figure stooped towards Egg. 'See here, Mr Pandervil. It's about that letter of yours.'

'Letter?' said Egg.

'Yes. It come this morning right enough. P'raps I was surprised to get it, p'raps I wasn't. I won't say it was what I'd call a neighbourly letter, Mr Pandervil; but I will say that maybe I deserved it.'

Egg was troubled and mystified. 'Got the letter on you, Mr Wimmett?' Mr Wimmett looked astonished. 'Mind if I have a look at it,' said Egg. 'Just to refresh my memory, you know.'

Mr Wimmett found the letter in his pocket. Egg, having read it through, handed it back with an apologetic frown. It was not a neighbourly letter, and it was signed E. Pandervil. Egg had never seen it before.

'Funny thing,' said Egg, after a difficult silence. 'I didn't remember the letter was quite so . . . so strong as that.' A conflict raged within him: to whom was his loyalty due—to himself and his friendship with Wimmett, or to the writer of that letter?

'Well, I must say,' said Mr Wimmett, 'since you've said it yourself, as good as, I must say it don't read to me quite like you, Mr Pandervil. Still I'm not saying I don't deserve it, and if you can be patient a while longer I'll see you get every penny of it, every blessed penny. I tell you what I'll do, what's more,' cried Mr Wimmett, with sudden enthusiasm, 'I'll pay interest on it. Ten per cent. I'll pay. No, twenty per cent. . . .'

Egg interrupted him, for he saw that in the ecstasy of this resolution Mr Wimmett was in danger of regarding the debt as already paid, and of walking out of the shop inflated with a sense of his own generosity. 'We don't want interest, and we won't have it. But we do,' said Egg, remembering Carrie, 'we do want the account paid, and the sooner the better. Fact is,' he added, unable to sustain his asperity, 'Mrs Pandervil doesn't care about giving credit at all. It's always been spot cash in this shop, and that's the best way in my opinion. Pay for what you have *when* you have it,

and then this kind of unpleasantness between neighbours doesn't arise.' Old Mr Noom, could he have heard this speech, would have smiled recognition at it.

'Ah, Mr Pandervil, if I could only lay my hands on a fifty-pound note, I'd never run up another account as long as I lived, I wouldn't.'

'By the way,' said Egg, 'I don't know if you're a man for riddles and problems and general knowledge and suchlike.'

'Pretty middling that way,' said Mr Wimmett.

'Well, I met some folks the other day. No one you know. Nice people too. Well, we got talking, and the question come up: when they call people honourable, what does that mean? Some said this, some said that. In the end, I'm dashed if we didn't have a little bet on it.'

'Honourable?' Mr Wimmett looked as though he didn't quite like the tone of the conversation. 'You're not getting at me, Mr Pandervil? For let me say this, that I didn't come here to be called out of my name. I'm a mild man, Mr Pandervil, and I try to be neighbourly with them as is neighbourly-minded. But if I thought. . . .'

'Bless my soul!' Egg laughed with a boisterousness that would not have deceived a less simple man than Mr Wimmett. 'What bree's biting you now?' he cried, and his tongue took pleasure in remembering that Mershire saying. 'No, no, Mr Wimmett, you're on the wrong track. What I mean is this. Suppose you call somebody, as it might be, the Honourable John Smith, 'what's

the meaning of that? Some said,' added Egg hopefully, 'that it was something to do with a man's father.'

'Dunno,' said Mr Wimmett. 'Lost my poor old father years ago. Give it up. What's the answer.'

'No good asking me,' replied Egg. 'We had a little bet on it. Of course it makes no matter, whatever it means. But you know how folks get talking. Myself, I thought it might be this way. Suppose your father was a lord, Lord Farringay we'll say. Then you'd be the Honourable So-and-So Wimmett. But that's only a guess.'

Mr Wimmett smiled wanly, and repeated the rich fantastic words with the air of trying them on his person: 'The Honourable So-and-So Wimmett! That's a good one, that is! Though I reckon a fifty-pound note'd be more use to me than a high-sounding affair like that. Well, good day, Mr Pandervil.' He paused at the door to inquire, over his shoulder: 'Children well? . . . And *Mrs* P? . . . That's right. Well, good day to you, I'm sure.'

It was not a busy morning, and the few little tasks demanded of him from time to time—a big parcel to be made up for the Vicarage, a pound and a half of best cheese for Mrs Simmons, and seven pounds of preserving sugar for Mrs Blake—did not seriously interrupt his secret train of thought. He could not forget the contrast between what he had seen in the lid of that biscuit-tin with what he had seen in the little, deal-framed mirror on his chest of drawers at home. And a third face

sometimes appeared among his thoughts. Just before noon Mr Wimmett put his head in the doorway, a certain air of triumph colouring the vague hesitancy that was his normal manner. 'Mr Pandervil, you there? Ah, I just looked in to tell you about that puzzle of yours. Went and asked Mr Pummice, I did. I thought he'd know. I said to myself: If there's one man in Farringay as'll know, that man's Mr Pummice.'

Egg waited patiently. 'Well? What did he say?'

'You was right, he says. If I was the Honourable So-and-So Wimmett—that's a good one, that is!—my father would be a lord. A belted earl, I think Mr Pummice said. You know what a one he is for his joke. So you'll have won your bet, I reckon?'

Egg nodded and laughed. 'Yes, I s'pose I have.'

But his demeanour, when Mr Wimmett was out of sight, did not suggest that of a man who has won a bet. He looked guiltily round the shop; then began feeling in his waistcoat pocket. But at that point his courage failed him. He hesitated; he heard steps approaching from the house, exasperated steps; and, with a spasm of anxiety passing over his face, he called out: 'All right, Carrie! I'm coming. I'm coming.' There was urgency in his voice. He went into the house at once.

Carrie and Mrs Noom were already seated at the dinner-table, with five-year old Mabel and one-year-old Bobbie within easy reach of them.

Mabel, nearest her grandmother, was a sullen-looking child, and her voice was already edged with the note of complaint. Egg would sometimes mildly reprove her for these ungracious airs, but he was not encouraged to do so. 'Why must you always be *on* at her, Father?' Carrie would say. 'She's not feeling well, poor lamb, issums, ducky?' If, on the other hand, he seemed disposed to take pleasure in his daughter's existence, he was accused of spoiling her. 'She's a pert enough miss already, Father, without you fussing and petting of her. Leave the child alone, do!' He left the child alone; and, if the truth must be told, it was no great hardship to him. Before her birth the prospect of fatherhood had stirred him more to curiosity than to any other feeling, and such pleasure as he had known in anticipation was quickly quenched. The smallness and helplessness of the baby excited compassion in him, but he did not feel towards it any specifically paternal tenderness. Mabel and Bobbie were Carrie's children; it happened that he was their father. Absurd, but it was so. Absurd and unaccountable, and it sometimes profoundly humiliated him to reflect how utterly he had been shaped and bullied by events. Of what he had wished and planned to do, he had done nothing. Instead, he had done a number of involuntary things, acquiring in the process a number of irrelevant possessions, among which were these two children, a shop, and a mother-in-law. Was Carrie herself, then, excluded from this category? That was a question he did not even ask, still less

answer: either because some secret fear, parading in the dress of loyalty, forbade so radical an examination of his heart, or because, having learnt a wisdom of sorts, he was ready, given the slightest encouragement, to exaggerate the compensating advantages of his plight.

'Now Mabe!' said Egg. Haven't you got a hanky?'

Mabel scowled without answering. He repeated his challenge.

'Yes, Father.'

'Then you'd better use it, me dear.'

Bobbie, for no assignable reason, began screaming with rage. 'Diddums wantum din-din den?' murmured Mrs Noom, with a reproachful glance at Egg. She thrust a rubber teat into the child's mouth. Carrie, who sat within hand's reach of Bobbie, so that she could slap him or cuddle him according to her varying mood, fixed the child with a commiserating stare and remarked to the world at large that some people always did have to be interfering. This did not appease Bobbie, who, having skilfully ejected the 'comforter', resumed his screaming. As a screamer Bobbie was an unqualified success. He was thorough; he was a worker. He had, for the time being, adopted screaming as his chief business in life, and by industry and perseverance, his deceased grandfather's favourite virtues, he seemed likely to make that business prosper and pay large dividends. Egg, though he made no voluntary sign, was unable to conceal his discomfort; but the two women, with-

out any further attempt to subdue the screamer, began eating ribs of mutton with an air that told him plainly enough that he had brought it all on himself. He did not rhetorically inquire, either of the women or of himself, what conceivable connection there could be between his daughter's dirty nose—it was still dirty—and his son's fury; experience had taught him the futility of such questions. He sat silent, munching his food; and, when the nuisance became too grievous to be borne any longer, he resorted to a favourite expedient of his, which was to close his eyes and pretend that the noise he heard was that of a steam-engine rushing through a tunnel. In this way, by losing himself in a fantasy of travel, he was able to get just that moment's respite without which, it seemed to him, he must infallibly have gone mad. After five minutes of this intermittent hell Carrie went out of the room to fetch food for its author. When she rose, it became apparent that she was carrying her third child.

There was no conversation during the meal. So much the better, thought Egg. That Carrie was in a disagreeable mood did not greatly surprise or anger him; he was eager indeed to make allowances for her, for there existed in him, deep down and long forgotten, a dumb and utterly irrational gratitude to Carrie that dated from her first bodily surrender to him. 'Put the light out, do! It's a disgrace.' Half furtive and half eager that surrender had been, missing beauty by reason of her conviction of sin, her shame which made him

ashamed, yet touched, in the end, with a hint of frail grace by her awakening compassion for him. She had kissed him warmly, forgivingly. For that he had been grateful; without knowing it, he was grateful still; that gratitude, buried in him but buried alive, moved him to exercise a degree of patience which he himself, had he seen events from the outside, would have found unaccountable. He no longer, unless disturbed, as he was now, by some unwonted excitement, spent any thought on such matters; marriage was become very much a routine affair; but in those early days he had been greatly perplexed, and for a while deeply unhappy. For what was a man to do? After that sorry bridal night it seemed to him only reasonable to suppose that 'all that sort of thing', which Carrie appeared to find degrading and repellent, was at an end between them; but his wife quickly found means to convince him of his mistake. She knew her duty, she loved her husband, and for nothing in the world would she be unkind to him. 'And besides . . .' said Carrie, and hid her face in the pillow. And so she gave him, insisted on giving him, everything of herself except such beauty and candour as might have made the gift a precious one. He never saw her unclothed. It was his privilege to see her with her hair in curlpapers, to watch her—were he so minded—brushing her teeth, and, inadvertently, to surprise her in various inelegant stages of undress; but her body's grace, the body his own had embraced in darkness, was never revealed to him. Once, before the first baby

had been weaned, he entered the bedroom unexpectedly in the middle of the morning, to be greeted with an alarmed cry: 'You mustn't come in now, dear! Go away, do! Baby's having her breakfast.' He reproached himself for his rough country manners: but with only half his heart, for surely, he thought, if things had fallen out differently for me . . .? That conjecture had been too wonderful to be stated even in thought. . . .

'There's the bell, dear!' said Carrie.

'Right-O!' answered Egg. 'I've had all the dinner I want, anyhow.'

He was glad to get back to the shop, where, with less drastic interruption and in a more congenial atmosphere, he could resume his dream, and perhaps, if fortune favoured him, could torture himself once again with a sight—the still astonishing sight—of her name. Mingling with these reflections was a reiteration of his resolve to have it out with Carrie about that Wimett letter. She didn't ought to have done that; it's going a bit too far, that is, I'm dashed if I don't tell her so. He doubted, nevertheless, whether his indignation would keep warm enough to be worth pouring out upon her; opportunities of private talk were rare indeed in this household, for when the children were not present Mrs Noom was. Bedtime was the only time for talk, and nowadays at bedtime they were so often too sleepy to exchange more than an indifferent word or two. In the first years of their marriage Egg had found the richest of his compensations, the most substantial reward of intimacy,

in the kindly comfort of that lying side by side in the darkness, quietly turning over, in thought and drowsy speech, the day's doings and the morrow's possibilities; and it was by virtue rather of such homely satisfactions than of passion, or of the marriage service permissive of passion, that Carrie was truly his wife, a woman for whom he would have—even while he might be hating her—a unique, an obstinate, a highly inconvenient and exasperating affection.

Of all this he was not aware, except perhaps in a very dim and confused fashion. Such reflections, indeed, would by no means have accorded with his mood, which was, so far as he could make it so, one of resentment and stern resolution. Yes, Carrie should certainly be told about it—making free with his signature like that, and setting his old friends against him! But his heart was not in this punitive enterprise; his heart was in his fingers which, during all that afternoon and evening, when no one was observing them, would be forever moving towards his waistcoat pocket. Nevertheless, when he followed Carrie that night into their bedroom he at once, with the courage of desperation, launched his attack.

'Wimmett came into the shop to-day. About that blessed account of his.'

'Did he pay it?' asked Carrie.

'No. But he promised he would. And look here, Carrie!' Egg's indignation was by now unfeigned; he had vividly remembered Wimmett's crestfallen air. 'Look here, Carrie! You'd no

call to go and write him that letter you did. Tisn't fair on me, either, signing my name to it like that!'

'Oh, you and your Wimmetts,' said Carrie, 'you fair give me the stomach-ache.'

Her tone was less sharp than he had expected it to be. In effect she had accepted his rebuke, and honour was satisfied. He said no more, but glanced at her with a certain curiosity visible in his eyes. She returned his glance, half grinning, with a kind of lazy tolerance which he, from his seven years knowledge of her, took to be a sign that she was pleased with him and with herself. Yet there was a change in her; there was something he did not remember to have seen before, and he was disconcerted by it, for having accepted her as familiar, a book read from cover to cover, he did not wish to be compelled at this time of day to take a new interest in her. At the moment, however, he was busy with other and dearer things.

She came close to him and put a hand on his shoulder. 'You might give us a kiss.'

Astonished to the point of alarm, he did as he was told.

'Something to tell you, Eggie!'

'What is it?' asked Egg.

'Well, I'm getting rid of Ma. That's what it is.'

It was too good to be true, but Egg could not rejoice. 'How do you mean?'

'She's going. Clearing out. Leaving us to ourselves. And about time, too!'

'When did she tell you this?'

Carrie smiled, and Egg could not help thinking that there was cruelty in her smile. 'She didn't. I told *her*.'

'You're never turning her out!' protested Egg.

'Well!' exclaimed Carrie. 'Well, I never did! If you're not the softest-hearted old goose in the world, I never seen one.'

Egg was troubled. 'Whad she say? Make a fuss? And where's she going?'

'Oh, I've found her a place. Nice little place it is, too, and the woman next door'll come in and do for her.'

'*Do* for her?'

'Clean up for her.'

'Well, of course,' said Egg, 'I don't say I'm so anxious to have her about. But it couldn't have been for long, anyhow. Seems hard on an old woman of over seventy to be bundled out of her home like as if she was a bit of furniture. What suddenly put it into your head, Carrie, after all these years? She hasn't been so bad lately, has she?'

'Oh, hasn't she just!' Carrie sniffed, without thereby enhancing her attractiveness. 'If you saw as much of her as I 'ave to, you wouldn't ask what suddenly put it into my head. Put it into my head indeed. It's time you and me was alone a bit, as you'd a bin the first to have said if you'd bin half a man. Put it into my head——'

'All right. All right. She's *your* mother, not mine.' Egg raised his voice to dam the tide of her speech; then lowered it to mumble, inaudibly:

'And you get more like her every minute, you do!' But already his thought had wandered back to its former obsession. 'Going downstairs for a second. Believe I left the shop-door unbolted.'

'Just like you if you did,' said Carrie.

Leaving Carrie with the lighted candle for company he groped his way down the dark stairs and into the shop. He was still fully dressed, and there were matches in his pocket. He lit the lamp. But he did not examine the bolts of the shop-door. He went eagerly to the counter, and taking, at last, that treasure from his waistcoat pocket, he flattened it out with trembling fingers. It was a torn and tiny fragment of newspaper. He stared at it as though it had been the strangest, most precious, most terrible thing in the world. He had utterly forgotten the tremendous piece of news just imparted to him by Carrie. He had utterly forgotten Carrie herself. Yet there was nothing so very remarkable in what he read:

iage has been arranged and will
ke place between Major George William
he Coldstream Guards, eldest son of the Rev.
ildmay, and the Hon. Monica Wrenn, only dau

The paper, besides being crookedly torn, had been rendered all but illegible by contact with something wet and bloody. It was, however, not Egg's life-blood that stained it, but that of a young calf, part of whose liver—a nice tasty piece—Carrie had brought home from her marketing last Saturday.

2

It is probable that Mrs Noom never forgave Carrie for turning her out of the home she had occupied for forty years, and it remained a puzzle to Egg how his wife had had the heart to conceive such a scheme, and how, the resolution made, she had found courage and cunning enough to put it into effect. In a series of discussions that tended to become acrimonious Carrie did her best to enlighten his darkness. She flew into a rage when she discovered, more by chance than by direct questioning, that, though he professed still to hate Mrs Noom for her treatment of the old man, he hated far more bitterly the idea of casting her out. She was old; as a grandmother, though in no other capacity, she was almost benevolent; and she would be lonely in her new cottage, however efficient the ministrations of the woman who was 'to do for her'. And had she not, he inquired, been a great help to Carrie with the children? This, as it proved, was not a fortunate remark, since in Carrie's eyes Mrs Noom's chief offence was that she had tried to come between the children and their mother. 'Knows too much by half, she does!' exclaimed Carrie, with exceeding bitterness. 'What does a girl like me know about rairing children! Oh, nothing, to be sure ! It's her or me goes, Egg Pandervil, so I tell you straight.' Egg had already given up the argument, but Carrie couldn't let it rest. 'What's more I want her bedroom for the gel. When Baby's born we'll have to get a gel,

and she'll have to sleep somewhere. I s'pose . . . But p'raps she could sleep under the counter!' cried Carrie, with angry sarcasm. Egg walked away, closing the door behind him. He knew no other method of silencing Carrie, once she was roused. And it would do her no good, he thought, to get so worked up; for the time of her delivery was now very near.

One can scarcely suppose that during her last six weeks in familiar surroundings Mrs Noom did not suffer considerable anguish of heart, facing, as she was now compelled to do, the prospect of a more drastic change than anything in all her long experience save for her husband's death; yet Egg caught himself wondering whether the pleasures of her situation were not more real to her than its pains. He said as much to Carrie, for every day Mrs Noom's behaviour made it easier for him to feel less sorry for her. Having complained all her life of scorn and neglect, the old woman was now, and for the first time, provided with a genuine grievance, the magnitude of which could scarcely fail, after the first shock of horror, to afford her a certain grim satisfaction. This is conjecture, for into Mrs Noom's private mind Egg was never able to peep; but there can be no question that she threw herself with some relish into the part—so rich in melodramatic quality—that an unkind fate, with Carrie for stage-manager, had now cast her for. She quickly took the stage-management out of her daughter's hands; for even Carrie, well as she knew her mother, could not have known that she had

kept so clean and bright and sharp her talent for persecution. She watered the children with her tears, and set Mabel crying: 'Dear Granny, don't leave Mabe!' The days were measured by her long-suffering sighs; and two nights were dedicated to deathbed scenes less convincing, by many degrees, than the first of that series. Often towards the end of a hearty meal, she would suddenly declare that the food choked her and she daren't touch another crumb; and more than once, at suppertime, she publicly assured the Lord that she would bear her cross without murmuring. She saw to it that no one in the house, the children least of all, forgot that she was under sentence of expulsion. On the axis of poor Granny's patient martyrdom the Pandervil world revolved.

Though it caused him some inevitable discomfort, Egg paid but scant attention to Mrs Noom's behaviour, his mind being, as usual, occupied with more pressing affairs. He had long been a thrall to regret; and now he was acquiring the habit of worry. In particular he was worrying about the expected child. Neither he nor Carrie wanted another child; she was weary of carrying and giving birth, to say nothing of the long sequel of nursing; and he, for his part, shrank from the vicarious suffering these processes entailed for him no less than from the practical nuisance and misery of harassed days and broken nights. He was anxious, too, on Carrie's account, for her last confinement had been a long and grim ordeal: so grim that no amount of patience now, he thought, could ever

'make it up to her'. But there it was; another child was soon to be born; and while he kept saying to himself that after all it couldn't be helped, these things being decided for us by One Above, he yet felt guilty about it, a lout, a clumsy fellow. It made him feel a fool that having got poor Carrie into this plight he could do nothing at all to help her, but must just stand about, anxious and ridiculous, awaiting the issue of events. His friend Farthing, to whom, in an unprecedented moment of confidence, he confessed these feelings, thought him a queer fellow and laughed at his self-reproaches and his fears. 'You'll soon get used to it, Mr Pandervil, my boy! After a while it comes as easy and natural as shelling peas. Wait till you've got your sixth. Then'll be the time to talk about too many.' Mr. Farthing had begotten six.

It pleased Mrs Noom to leave the house just as Carrie's labour was about to begin. 'Fetch the doctor, dear. It's starting,' said Carrie, with pain shewing in her face. 'And,' said Mrs Noom, 'you can fetch me a cab while you're at it, Egg Pandervil. There'll be no room for me in this house now. Come, Carrie, my love, I'll help you to your bed and then I'll go from where I'm not wanted.' Half an hour later, Farringay was scandalized by the spectacle of a white-haired old lady—wonderfully prim and sweet in her best bonnet, black beaded dress, and elastic-sided boots—seated on a large tin trunk in the middle of the road. Such a thing had never happened in the High Street before, and the gossips were soon busy with it. Who

could it be? Why, it was Mrs Noom! Mrs Noom, poor old thing, bundled out of her own house, and waiting, as brave as brave, for the cab to come and take her away. Why, she might be run over, sitting there like that!

But Mrs Noom was not run over. She had chosen her place with some care, and she was far too conspicuous an obstacle to be overlooked by the astonished carters, who, pulling their horses violently to the side of the road, could not forbear asking her what was amiss. She, not ill-disposed for conversation, explained in a gentle voice and with a sad smile that it was nothing, nothing at all; she was only an old widow lady turned out of doors by her daughter. Yes, Mrs Noom she was, of Noom's Stores, and seventy years old as near as made no matter, and her daughter was married to a man named Pandervil, a quiet enough man to look at, and yet—but it wasn't her way to say a word against her own son-be-law, nor she never would. Dabbing her eyes with a tiny handkerchief, she smiled a gallant acknowledgment of all kind inquiries, and she praised the Lord for letting this bad bad business happen on a nice summer day, for if it hadda bin winter she didn't hardly know how she coulda borne it, 'being not so young as I was, and with my poor rheumatics to try me.' Mrs Noom was bounded on the east by an ancient gingham umbrella, which lay in the road with its ferrule pointing accusingly at Noom's Stores, and on the west by her booted feet; and it was impossible for a cart to avoid contact with one or other of these

extremities except by special diligence on the part of its driver.

Egg, meanwhile, was panting along the Binstead road in search of someone who would assist an unwanted child into the world. He had called at Dr Renwick's, and, learning that the doctor was out on his rounds, had left a message. He was sick with anxiety. Had he not taken the precaution of looking in at Farthing's shop, to stammer a word of entreaty to Farthing's missus, he would have been almost in despair. Before he had been running twenty minutes, however, he was overtaken by a tall gentleman riding a boneshaker. The clothes and deportment of this stranger proclaimed him a swell, and he managed his machine with the most elegant skill imaginable. In ordinary circumstances Egg would certainly not have ventured to address this gentleman except across the shop-counter; but he hailed him now, without pausing to calculate the chances of being thought an impudent fellow, and in two breathless sentences explained his urgent need of a doctor. And the velocipedist, having performed the gymnastic feat of dismounting, proved on closer acquaintance to be very pleasant and condescending; for he listened without any sign of being offended, and his free hand twirled his long drooping moustaches —first one, then the other—with an agitation that clearly expressed his sense of the crisis. 'Very well, my man! I shall do the best I can for you.' His best, through no fault of his own, availed Egg nothing; for in twenty-five minutes he returned

with the news that this other doctor, too, was out visiting his patients. 'Deuced anxious time for you.' said the gentleman. 'I can see that.'

Egg's homeward journey was achieved in a series of desperate sprints and accompanied by the sensation of bursting lungs; it was further embittered by his renewed sense of unworthiness, of being, in this practical crisis, good for nothing. He could not get rid of the idea, which in moments of cool intelligence he would have been quick to recognize as preposterous, that he himself was somehow to blame for the fact that these doctors had eluded him. The dismal fact served to emphasize his powerlessness. He could, by inadvertence, beget the child; and that was the beginning and the end of his capacity. This pricking of conscience lacked the definition of thought; for his mind, ill-disposed at any time for the systematic rationalizing of feelings, was now too full of Carrie and her danger to accommodate anything else. He ran headlong into the High Street, and the sight of Mrs Noom sitting on her trunk in the road did not for a moment arrest him. Let the old bitch stay there, he muttered, and almost before his lips had finished moving, his mind released Mrs Noom into oblivion. He found Farthing's missus waiting in the shop to receive him.

He stared at her. 'Doctors all out. How's she going on?'

"Sall right!' said Mrs Farthing, who was forty-five and looked fifty—a lean woman with boot-button eyes. 'Doctor Renwick's with 'er.'

'Doctor Renwick!'

'Came twenty minutes ago. And that person as calls herself a nurse is helping him, or getting in his way. As to that I've my own opinion.'

'Is she . . . bad?'

'Mrs P? Well, it's early to say, isn't it. Bad, yes. Sometimes it's worse and sometimes it's worse still, but it's always bad. I've heard of women having easy times at their lying-ins, but I've never met one. I *'ave* 'eard of unicorns and zebberers, if it comes to that. But there! I didn't ought to be talking this way to a gentleman!' She added that she must get away along back to her shop. 'I sold a pound of candles for you, and here's the money. They said it was right.'

He thanked her warmly, and as soon as she was gone he lapsed into a state of musing. For a while, being assured that the doctor was doing all that could be done, he felt relieved of all responsibility, comparatively carefree. It was true that Carrie was not yet out of danger. Carrie might even die, and —more because he had a profound horror of death than because it meant losing Carrie—he did not want her to die. But just now the idea of her dying was not real or vivid enough to appal him. He stared at it speculatively. In fancy he saw her funeral. His black gloves split in one finger when he put them on. The sweet detestable smell of white lilies assailed him. Carrie's relations, an endless tribe, unctuous, snivelling, black-garbed, filed past him into the room where the coffin was . . . He shook himself out of his evil dream.

But he remembered, too well, Mr Noom's funeral. A nasty sweaty business.

'Mr Pandervil!' Someone had run in from the street. It was Mr Pummice. 'The old lady's gone off!'

'Eh?' Which old lady could that be? Oh, yes. 'Glad to hear it,' said Egg.

Mr Pummice appeared to be profoundly shocked by this remark. His features quivered like the protuberances on a jelly-mould. 'Glad to hear it!'

'Well,' said Egg sheepishly, 'we didn't want her sitting in the road *all* day, did we!' But the sight of his neighbour's extreme perturbation suggested a more sinister interpretation of his phrase. 'Gone off? You said gone off, dint you? You don't mean she's——'

'Gone off in a faint or fit or something,' supplied Mr Pummice. 'Seems to me,' he added severely, as Egg lifted the flap of the counter and hurried forward, 'seems to me it's time you remembered your duty to that poor old lady, Mr Pandervil.' He seized Egg's arm and hurried him into the street.

Another and younger woman was now seated on the tin trunk, and in the lap of this stranger Mrs Noom's head reclined. The rest of her person sprawled shockingly—but not, thought Egg, uncomfortably—on the road. A group of awestruck children and a sprinkling of sympathetic neighbours lent an extra touch of drama to the scene. Egg, taking a sixpenny piece from his pocket, approached the eldest-looking among the children. 'See here, my lad!' said he, and bent to the child's

ear. With his back to the neighbours he could hear the voice of the young woman, excited and compassionate: 'I b'lieve she's coming to!' And he turned round to confirm his astonished guess that this was no stranger after all, but Fanny Hunt; and uncommonly pretty she looked, as he couldn't help noticing, though not so pretty as she had been. Conscious that something was expected of him, he stepped reluctantly into the inner circle of first-aiders. Mr Pummice was at that moment trying to pour a few drops of brandy into the sufferer's mouth. But her teeth were tightly clenched.

'Tight as can be!' exclaimed Mr Pummice, grimacing over his shoulder at Egg. 'Like a vice, upon my word.'

'Try holding her nose a bit,' suggested Egg.

From the indignant murmurs that arose, and from the reproach flashed at him from the pretty hazel eyes of Fanny Hunt, he realised that he had said the wrong thing. Couldn't the noodles *see* that the old woman was shamming?

'Not the man I thought you,' muttered Mr Pummice, yearning tenderly over the recumbent figure of Mrs Noom. 'Not by any manner of means . . . Heartless!' he declared, nuzzling the mouth of his flask against the tight-shut lips of his patient. 'No bowels!' he added, in a somewhat louder voice, chucking her gently under the chin. Despairing of success, he got up and repeated his remark with dreadful distinctness. 'No bowels of compassion, Mr Pandervil!'

There followed a loud silence.

'Can't you *see* she's making game of us?' Egg spoke his thought aloud. 'Fit! Fainting! Does she *look* as if she's fainted? Not her. She's as tough an old party as ever walked, and the craftiest too . . . Hullo, here comes the doctor! Doctor! Doctor Renwick!'

Mrs Noom gave a gasp, opened her eyes, and murmured: 'Where am I?'

'You see?' said Egg. 'As soon as she thinks the doctor's coming, she's as right as a trivet. She thought he was safe out of reach, and so he was, and so he is,' he added excitedly. But he might have saved his breath, for whichever way he turned, there were shocked faces staring at him. 'Come along, Ma!' he said. 'He's a fine doctor, Doctor Renwick is! Just the sound of his name puts you right, don't it?' But the confidence had gone out of him. The weight of public sentiment was too oppressive.

While Fanny Hunt stroked the old woman's head and made maternal noises over her, Mr Pummice, evidently feeling that Farringay waited for a lead from him, stepped forward a pace and cleared his throat nervously. 'The quality of mercy,' he began. Then, abandoning his quotation with the air of a man who drops his sword and resorts to a cudgel, he remarked in a swelling voice: 'As for You, sir! I can only conclude that you have Taken Leave of your Senses.' There was a murmur of applause. 'Please!' he said, raising a deprecating hand. 'Please! . . . Let's carry the the poor old lady into the house.'

Egg, who until this moment had listened with an uneasy grin, suddenly and fatally lost his temper. 'Not into my house, nor my shop neither! Be damned if you shall. Be damned! Be damned!' The little crowd shuddered away from this wicked and violent man. The cab drove up, with Egg's messenger riding triumphantly in it. 'Now then!' said Egg. 'In you go!' He darted towards the prostrate Mrs Noom, pushing aside Pummice who sought to bar his passage. 'You go and make faces at home, Pummice!' He stooped over his mother-in-law; she stared and screamed at him with vexation. The next instant, before anyone could stay him, he was carrying her bodily to the waiting cab. 'In with you!' She was in. He shut the door. 'And a mighty good riddance!' The cab drove off.

Wonderfully refreshed by this release of anger, perhaps heartened by the discovery that he was still capable of resolute and even violent action, he grinned without malice at the backs of his dispersing neighbours; and when he observed that the tin trunk still occupied the middle of the road, it distressed him not at all. The cabman ought to have remembered it; his instructions had been explicit; but it could be sent on later—to-morrow, or next week. And if the old woman lacked a nightdress, she could sleep in her shift.

He dragged the trunk to the door of his shop, from which, just as he reached it, Doctor Renwick was emerging.

The sight of the trunk appeared to surprise the doctor. 'Left it behind, did she! After making

me lug it out of the house for her, the old baggage!' He laughed. 'Did I hear someone out here calling me a few minutes ago?'

'Yes, but it's all right now . . . Is it over?' He scanned the doctor's face and was alarmed by what he seemed to see there.

'Yes, it's over.'

'Do you mean . . . ' Did he mean that Carrie was dead?

'Stillborn, I'm sorry to say. As I feared. Your wife's pulling through pretty well. Shaken up, and she'll be disappointed, of course. But it was a quick delivery.'

Egg found himself wanting to weep: not for the death of an unknown baby, but for the squandered agony, the courage, the dumb endurance. He pictured Carrie lying up there staring at the wall, rather sulky, but with the sulkiness of a child threatened by a storm of tears. His heart tightened. 'Can I go and see her?'

'I've put her to sleep,' said Doctor Renwick. 'But you can go in quietly and have a look at her. She won't wake for an hour or two, I fancy. And . . . by the way, I'll make all the necessary arrangements. See?'

He was gone before Egg could reply.

Egg tiptoed his way into the room. The nurse —that district nurse so despised by Mrs Farthing —shot at him a glance of mournful welcome. He approached the bed and stared down at his wife. She was sleeping peacefully, her lips slightly parted. Tears started to his eyes. She was neither

pretty nor young; but her expression of naive contentment made her seem not only a child, but a child mocked. P'raps it's for the best, he said to himself. After all we didn't really want another, either of us. But the sense of waste and of some fundamental desolation was still quick in him; and, as he slouched out of the room, another picture flashed into his mind, for a moment displacing Carrie. He saw Mrs Noom as—without thought, without understanding—he had seen her less than ten minutes ago. Having fought her last fight and suffered defeat, she sat back in the cab that was to take her into exile. There was a dazed look in her eyes, a bitter twist about her lips . . . And Egg, re-living this moment as he slowly descended the stairs, heaved a sigh that was half sadness and half homage—though what this homage could mean, and to whom it was offered, were questions which, had they entered his mind, he would have been puzzled indeed to answer.

3

During the next few years there was a decided coolness between Mr Pandervil, persecutor of old ladies, and Mr George Pummice, Farringay's literary stationer. Moreover, there was for a while a general feeling that Mr Pandervil had behaved scandalously—first throwing his own mother-in-law into the street, and then, with her at death's door as you might say, taking hold of her like as if she'd a bin a sack of coals and emptying her head

first into that cab. Mr Pummice was voted a hero for the way he had 'stood up' to the wild man; and no one thought the better of Mr Pandervil for having punched and kicked and bitten a gentleman nigh fifteen years older than himself. 'Like a mad dog he was,' declared Fanny Hunt, the post office maiden, whose hatred of Egg was advertised all over Farringay. She never wearied of describing how Mr Pandervil had picked the old woman up and carried her, as easy as easy, to the cab. 'Must be strong as a lion!' she would say, her eyes shining with an excitement that reduced her age by at least five years. And she would add, with a small delicious shudder, that he oughtn't to be at large, it wasn't safe it wasn't. Perhaps, in recent years, life had become just the least bit too safe for Fanny Hunt; she was now on the wrong side of thirty; and it may be that when her fellow-gossip had gone—'Well, Miss Hunt, I wouldn't care to meet a hooligan like *that* in a dark lane!' 'Nor wouldn't I, Mrs Tilly! My word, no! Good day to you!'—it may be that then, alone with her thoughts, she found it possible to modify her hatred of Mr Pandervil and even to half-enjoy her fear of encountering him in a dark lane.

With the help, perhaps of the Farthings, who made it their business to circulate an approximately true version of the story, Farringay soon forgot its disapproval of Egg. Not so Mr Pummice, who continued to turn his head away whenever the culprit came near him. By constant practice these two became adept in the art of avoiding each other, so

that they did not meet again until six years later, on the occasion of the Wimmett sale, at which, to their common discomfort, they found themselves standing side by side. For Wimmett, who had been getting into and out of difficulties all his commercial life, was at last being sold up by his creditors, the chief of whom was represented by a genial and very smartly dressed old gentleman from the metropolis. Mr Wimmett himself, whose career would have been very different if only he had been able to lay his hand on a fifty-pound note from time to time, watched the proceedings dull-eyed from a corner. The sale was being conducted in the drawing room. Near Mr Wimmett was that little brown mouse of a woman, his wife, who, staring round in a bewildered fashion at what with innocent pride she had called her 'best suit of furniture,' and at the knick-knacks on the mantelpiece, the lovely lustres and the imitation-bronze horses and the marble clock that had been Papa's magnificent wedding-present ten years ago, appeared to derive no pleasure from the reflection which must have crossed her mind, that she would never again have the bother of dusting these things and of putting the room to rights. Perhaps she was thinking of her seven children; for her children had been distributed among her comparatively rich relatives, and it was difficult to know when she might hope to see them all under one roof again. And perhaps that fugitive smile, which Egg found it peculiarly difficult to bear, meant that she was already planning the new home—smaller, no doubt, but

cosy and comfortable—which she was to have as soon as Mr Wimmett's ship came to harbour. She could not, however, but have known that Mr Wimmett's ship must be regarded as utterly becalmed unless and until he could lay his hand on . . . in short, until the first condition preliminary to any sort of success had been fulfilled; for it is notorious—and Mr Wimmett made no secret of the fact—that a man can do nothing and get nowhere in this world, nowhere at all, without he has a bit of capital behind him.

'A bad business, this!' remarked Mr Pummice. And lo, it was the insolent, the heartless Pandervil that he found himself addressing. And presently, with embarrassment rather than bitterness, and later with perhaps a twinge of regret for the years wasted in quarrelling, he was engaged in conversation with that ruffian. Both men were nervous of each other, and eagerly polite. Having once spoken they became afraid of silences. Egg talked rather rapidly, and almost at random; and Mr Pummice displayed an exaggerated interest in everything that was said to him, working his face into all manner of strange and eloquent shapes.

'Going . . . going . . . ' The hammer fell. 'Gone!' cried the auctioneer. 'Mr Pummice,' he muttered to the clerk.

'You buying?' said Egg.

'A few pieces,' admitted Mr Pummice.

'They want my brother here,' remarked Egg, after a silence.

'*Do* they now?' Mr Pummice, widening his

eyes, seemed to be fascinated by the suggestion. 'You got a brother, Mr Pandervil, have you? Now I never knew *that* before.'

'Yes, I got a brother all right,' said Egg, affecting a humorous grimness. 'These things *will* 'appen, Mr Pummice. All over the country they're 'appening. Brothers and sisters, sisters and brothers, there's no end to it . . . Hullo, they're off again!'

Mr Pummice was mystified but not silenced. 'Very true, Mr Pandervil. Very true indeed.' He nodded, somewhat furtively, to the auctioneer. 'And so you got a brother, Mr Pandervil. Well I never did!'

'He's older'n me though, my brother is,' said Egg.

'*Reelly!*' exclaimed Mr Pummice. That Mr Pandervil should have a brother unbeknownst was joy and astonishment enough, but that Mr Pandervil's brother should be older than Mr Pandervil was almost too good to be true. All this was written, clearly if grotesquely, in Mr Pummice's face. 'Really!' It was as if he were saying, in Dickensian phrase: 'Here's richness!'

'My brother Algy,' supplemented Egg, embarrassed by his companion's excess of politeness. 'Why I say they want him here is because he's an auctioneer. And a pretty middling goodish one by all accounts. I reckon if he was here he'd make the figures fly. Yes, fly all up in the air . . . This chap's slow as a week. What's he doing now, frinstance? Ah!'

The resumption of the sale was a relief to Egg, and conceivably it was a relief to Mr Pummice. Both felt that now they could keep silent without suspicion of boorishness or of bearing malice. Egg, defying Carrie and leaving young Mabe to look after the shop for an hour, had had, instead of his dinner, a drink or two—rare indulgence—at the Green Man in company with Farthing and Wimmett: the original band of something better than hope (said Farthing, with a pause for his laugh), needing only that old booby Pummice to make it quite like old times. And here was that old booby Pummice, that master of malice, looking, thought Egg, not nearly so black as the three friends, mournfully conscious of the occasion and glad to keep the conversation running in safe unsentimental channels, had delighted to paint him. Egg, at this moment, felt at once heavy-hearted and hilarious. The Wimmetts' plight had distressed and irritated him; he told himself he mustn't be so soft about other people's troubles; and he was giving generous rein to the reaction. When he recalled that absurd dispute with Pummice in the middle of the High Street, so many years ago, he wanted to laugh aloud and dig his old enemy in the ribs. I should like to pummel Pummice. I should like to pummice Pummel. That audit ale they gave us was strong stuff.

'I beg pardon,' said Mr Pummice.

'I didn't speak, Mr Pummice,' said Egg.

'My mistake, Mr Pandervil.'

The selling up of Wimmett was now proceeding

briskly. It was surprising to see so much furniture in the sale, surprising that so much furniture had ever been paid for. But the Wimmetts had begun in fine style; ten years ago it had been common talk in the village that Wimmett's marriage was making a new man of him, and his own sudden radiance lent colour to the belief. But whatever Wimmett's marriage had done for him, it had not done that, and nothing short of that could have saved him from ultimate ruin. Mr Wimmett was a gull, and it was Mr Wimmett who gulled him. He suffered from an overweening confidence not in himself but in the future, and not in the immediate future but in a remote, far-off event. Success was certain, but it was always so far away as to be not at the moment worth working for. Instead of working, instead of stocking his shop with numerous small domestic articles that people were constantly and vainly asking him for, he made magnificent plans. Next year, if all went well, he would get the landlord's permission to enlarge the premises, taking in half that bit of garden at the back, and joining the front parlour on to the shop, making, in fact, one large room of it like, by taking the door away or even pulling the wall down. All this was done, in Mr. Wimmett's mind, between breakfast and dinner; and from that time forth he never looked back. The money simply rolled in. And Mrs Wimmett, you may be sure, was as pleased with her wealth, and as proud of her husband, as a woman could well be, and there were no more of those plaintive questions and niggling

unimaginative criticisms which are so tiresome, so unhelpful, to a man engaged in dreaming himself rich. 'But we don't seem to sell the stock we've got, dear, do we? Why do we want room for more?' Doing it all for her, he was, worrying and planning all day long in the hope of decking out his wife in rich grenadine; and this—one can imagine him thinking—was all the thanks he got. The existence of the Wimmett children provoked Mr Farthing to a ribald affectation of surprise. When the first was announced he remarked: 'Never! Not Mr Wimmett! He musta dreamt it!' And he had since been called upon to invent six variants on this little joke.

'Thank you, ladies and gentlemen! And good day to you all!'

The sale was over, and the room was emptying. 'You were telling me, Mr Pandervil, as how you have a brother?'

'Yes.' What a funny fogey the man is, thought Egg. 'Yes, name of Algernon, but we always call him Algy. Wears check suits and sells sheep faster than any other feller in Mercester. Married too, he is, though I got ahead of him there.' He simulated mirth. 'And how have you been keeping, Mr Pummice, after all these years?' Ah, that was silly, that was a mistake; he'll think I'm digging up old scores.

'Pretty so-so,' said Mr Pummice. 'Yes, Mr Pandervil, I mustn't grumble. Business might be better, but it might,' he added portentously, with

a facial contortion that pointed an allusion to the Wimmetts, 'it might be a good deal worse.'

'Ah, yes,' agreed Egg, moving towards the door in the wake of the little crowd. 'I hear you're. . . .'

'Not me,' said Mr Pummice fiercely. 'It's none of my doing. Mrs Pummice—well, I won't deceive you, she's got a kind heart. *And* a spare room, what's more. F'my part, I don't hold with this coddling. I think he deserves all he's got. Yes, Mr Pandervil, every bit of it. And it's not my way to encourage idleness and sleepiness and sloth. Drowsiness shall clothe a man with rags, as the Bard of Avon tells us. And that's a true word.' He linked his arm in Egg's and drew him slowly towards the door. 'If I was a vulgar man, Mr Pandervil, which I hope and trust I never shall be, I should say that Master Dreamy Daniel Wimmett ought to have . . . well, you know what . . . and you know where.'

They were now in the doorway, and the room was empty but for Wimmett and his wife who were wandering aimlessly about, looking at this and that and exchanging a colourless word or two every few moments. Egg called good bye to them in as hearty a voice as he could command. 'You coming along, Mr Pummice?'

Mr Pummice replied with a terrifying grimace and was understood to whisper that he would linger awhile to have a word with these folks.

Egg nodded. 'I'll wait for you.' It seemed to him, in his present abnormal mood, only the neighbourly thing to do, and without curiosity he

watched Mr Pummice join the Wimmetts, take an arm of each, and march them into a corner, muttering savagely the while. What on earth was the old buffer doing? But more surprising than the behaviour of the old buffer was that of Mrs Wimmett, who suddenly, for no apparent reason, seized one of Mr Pummice's hands in both her own and gazed intensely into his face. Her lip quivered and her tears fell. Mr Pummice, shaking himself free, waved his hand airily in the direction of the table. 'That's the one,' he said. 'And those two chairs.' Seeing that her tears still fell he scowled at the marble clock and said: 'That's a bad bargain, I'll wager. Has it ever bin known to tell the time, Mrs Wimmett? Not much more use to you than your precious husband, if you ask me.' Catching at last a front view of Mr Pummice's face, Egg observed that the commotion among his features had reached the dimensions of cataclysm, and that water was running freely in and out of their numerous creases.

Deciding to wait no longer for Mr Pummice, although that gentleman was already edging towards the door, he went into the street and walked slowly homeward. But soon, thinking of all there was to be done, remembering Carrie and Mabe and Bobbie, to say nothing of Harold who was now four and quite old enough to help his brother get into mischief—thinking of these numerous responsibilities, from which for an hour or more he had been absent both in spirit and in person, he was seized with that fever of anxiety which

nowadays was almost his normal condition. He quickened his pace, conscience accusing him of grossly neglecting his duties as husband and father. Was not the Wimmetts' example a terrible warning to him! For many years now—since the hour of his wedding, to be precise—conscience had always in his thoughts worn Carrie's face and spoken in Carrie's sharp sarcastic tones; and by means of this device it had acquired a tyrannical power over him, so that nowhere, not even in his secret mind, could he be sure of a moment's peace. The income from the business could not keep pace with the needs of his growing family. There were now two rival grocers in the High Street, which was become an important thoroughfare; and several others held commanding positions on the outskirts of what was now called Old Farringay, or 'the village', to distinguish it from the large scattered suburb of which it was the centre. These supplied the large new residences and the rows of doubled-fronted villas, and Egg could not successfully compete with them. And so many of his best customers, while resisting the blandishments of these upstart grocers, got into the unpatriotic habit of taking tram to the city once a week—it could be done in fifty minutes with good horses and not too many stops—and doing there the greater part of their shopping. He had cares more personal and less definable than these, but these certainly helped to make him look and feel, at forty, a good deal older than his years.

Immersed in such thoughts, he noticed, without

the interest it might otherwise have aroused in him, that a carriage was drawn up outside Noom's Stores, from the door-way of which, with himself within five yards of it, a stranger emerged, a woman broadbrowed, full bosomed, and evidently in the prime of a radiant maturity. Her eyes wore a pensive look; and her mouth, grave and sweet, seemed to express an habitual kindness. She stepped, not proudly but with a patrician grace of movement, into the waiting carriage. Egg could see at a glance that she was 'a real lady', and not of Farringay. At his second glance his heart stood still. He stared in wonder and in a kind of terror . . . and he shuddered with relief, though feeling sick and dazed, when the enchantment that paralyzed him was snapped by the coachman's word to his horse, the gathered reins, the moving wheels. With a sense of escape he turned into the shop, where he found Carrie busy behind the counter.

At his entry Carrie looked up. She eyed him sharply. 'Lady asking bout you. Didjou see 'er?'

'Lady? What lady?'

'Her as jest went out of the shop. Must have run into her almost. In a kerridge she was.'

Egg considered. 'I *did* see a lady in a carriage,' he admitted judicially. 'What of it?'

'Ever seen her before?'

'Not me,' said Egg.

'She knows *you* anyhow. Seems she was a friend of yours when you was a lad with your father.'

'How's that?' Egg busied himself, unneces-

sarily, in moving bottles of pickle from one shelf to another. 'Who might she 'ave bin, I wonder?'

'Ask me another,' said Carrie. 'Just passing, she said she was. Just happened to see the name. Such an uncommon name. Oh, very la-di-dah she was, *I* can tell you!' sneered Carrie. 'Wanted to know was you the Mr Pandervil that useta be farming out at Mershire, when she was a girl staying at the Vicarage.'

'And what did you say to that?' inquired Egg, with his back towards her. He waited, in an ecstasy of apprehension, for the answer. No answer. 'What did you say to her, Carrie, when she arst that?' he said, turning round.

'Thank you,' said Carrie grimly. 'I never did care about talking to a man's backside. Well if you want to know, I sent her about her business. As good as.' She met his stare defiantly. 'I said there musta bin some mistake, and was there anything more to-day, ma'am? That's what I said.' After a bitter silence she added explosively: 'I don't want any of your swell ladies here, so I tell you straight.'

At that moment he hated Carrie. He could have wished her dead, save that, before such a wish could take shape, his despised 'softness' would have intervened against it. He hated Carrie, and he hated all the drab litter, the humiliating tangle of circumstances, that she symbolized for him. Yes, glad though he was that this visitor from another world would never come to torture him again, he believed that he would never forgive Carrie for

the words she had just uttered. It's all along of that new name, he thought; if we hadn't a changed the name this wouldn't a happened. And he remembered the day—soon after Mrs Noom's expulsion—when Carrie, excited as a young girl, had led him out of the shop to show him the innovation she had secretly, and with immense ingenuity, contrived as a 'surprise' for him:

E. Pandervil
late
Noom

Formerly the name of Noom had stood alone, and for the good of the business it must never be removed. But now, 'with Ma gorn', Carrie and Egg Pandervil were verily in possession at last. . . . Remembering that moment and her naive pleasure in it, he could not—ungenerous and unlovely though she was—hate her with an undivided heart.

4

Nevertheless he was conscious now of a deeper estrangement than anything that had divided him from Carrie before. Where there had been division indeed, but division superficially bridged by the words and gestures of routine affection, there was now, as it seemed to Egg, an impassable gulf of bitterness. For many days not only was he a prey to wretchedness, haggard with the savouring of an old grief and a new disgust, but —I don't care if she sees it, he said to himself

savagely; half a mind to have it out with her, I am; chaining me up like as if I was a dog! He half-decided that he would leave Carrie and her children for ever, and live the rest of his life as a farm-labourer in some remote Mershire village; the idea visited him in a series of idyllic pictures, and his manner with customers became noticeably absentminded. He tried to imagine what life would be like were it spent in the company of that bewitching stranger, that lovely lady who had once been his Monica; and, snatched up into a fool's paradise utterly and gloriously remote from reality, he would say to himself, Perhaps even now . . . only to remember, the next instant, what and where he was: a grocer, middle-aged, ridiculous, not over prosperous, and the father of three children. More than ever before he felt spiritually homeless. He had shut himself, willingly, out of Carrie's country; and no magic existed by whose virtue he could re-possess his own.

But the notion of escaping did not die so easily. He began to make mental lists of the things he would need to take. As for Carrie, she had the shop. It had been her shop always, and, though—as he now recalled with surprise—she had not been over-quick to remind him of her proprietorship in that matter, he had never spent more on himself than the wages of an ill-paid manager would have amounted to. Moreover he had, as a grocer, justified Carrie's confidence in him; for when it was discovered that Mr Noom had left trade debts

behind him as well as benevolent intentions, it was Egg's energy, to say nothing of sixty-three pounds ten which had been his share of the late Mrs Pandervil's estate, that saved the situation. That things had gone somewhat awry in recent years was none of his doing, he reflected. And now, let Carrie get on with it! She would manage, somehow. He would go to-morrow, or the day after to-morrow at the latest.

With this resolve in his mind he mounted the stairs and entered the shared bedroom. Carrie, half undressed, was putting her hair into curl-papers. He saw at once that she had been weeping, and his foolish heart betrayed him into asking: 'What's up?'

She wouldn't look at him. 'Caught again, that's all. Fat lot you care!'

'When did you know?' he asked. 'Are you sure.'

'Days and days . . . Yes, pretty sure.'

He cursed quietly, angry and compassionate. After a moment's silent brooding, while his fingers removed collar and tie, he remarked: 'Well, it had better be the last, if you ask me. I don't know what *you* think.'

A more friendly note sounded in Carrie's reply. 'Just what I was going to say. I've had about enough of it. At *my* age too!'

'Tell you what,' said Egg. He had forgotten that he would be leaving Carrie to-morrow, or the next day at latest. 'Tell you what . . . we'll see it doesn't happen again.' His voice was so eager

that he might have been proposing marriage instead of, in effect, a kind of divorce.

'How d'you mean?' said Carrie, frowning at him.

'Won't give it a chance. Won't risk it, see?' He was confused, being still afraid of shocking that famous modesty of hers.

Carrie, however, was no longer the timid bride. She understood his meaning and faced it. 'I didn't mean *that*,' she said. 'I didn't mean *that*. Might as well not be married at all.' She was silent for a while. 'There's other ways. Somebody was saying the other day . . . I met somebody who told me—never mind who it was. . . .' She tried again: 'It seems there's some new medicine out now. Almost certain it is, the person said that told me. So p'raps,' ended Carrie cheerfully, 'p'raps Harold'll be the last, after all. Three's plenty in a house this size.'

Egg looked gloomy. 'Don't much like the sound of that, Carrie. You better be careful with yourself.' And he made up his mind to do all he could dissuade her from the use of unknown and unauthorized 'medicines'. He was anxious about her, and the impending crisis of childbirth made him forget that he hated her. To-night she seemed to have lost something of her customary hard assurance, and when he blew the candle out and got into bed she crept up close to him, as if for protection. He kissed her cheek, and, because he felt guilty for not loving her, he gave her a second and a warmer kiss before turning over to

settle down to sleep. He fell into drowsy reflectiveness. When he looked back over the years of his marriage he found it easy to persuade himself that Carrie had once been kind and charming, and that he had loved her. It had always been so. From the bridal night itself, when had been contracted that mysterious debt of which he could have given no rational account, he had suffered the Carrie that now was for the sake of a Carrie that he pretended had once been. Despite her sharp tongue, her managing ways, her personal unattractiveness, he could not altogether ignore in himself a feeling of being tied to Carrie by something other than law and custom. Perhaps he encouraged the feeling; perhaps—who knows?—he half-wittingly induced it; and if ever he had asked himself why, it was to this arcady of the imagination, this period of mutual kindness and delight, that the answer would have pointed. And so, in requital of a past that he had never in fact experienced, he surrendered the future once more into her hands—a future for which, after all, he had now no other use.

CHAPTER THE FIFTH

FATHER AND SON

I

But if Egg thought that life held no more surprises for him, he was mistaken. At the age of forty-seven he found himself singing a somewhat sketchy bass in the choir of the Ebenezer Chapel. He was confessedly no musician, but the Reverend Shadrach Pierce welcomed him none the less heartily for that. 'The harvest truly is plenteous,' said Mr Pierce, 'but the labourers are few. And the Lord,' he added solemnly, 'listeneth not to the voice of man but readeth the secret heart.' To Egg that seemed a very good argument for his staying at home on Sunday to muddle through his accounts, instead of importuning the Lord with a service of song to which He would not listen; but he had a reluctant respect for the Reverend Shadrach Pierce, and was pleased, perhaps a little flattered, by his attentions. 'One of our leading citizens, Mr Pandervil,' said the pastor. 'Think of the value of the example to our district.' It had once been 'our village'; it became 'our town'; it was now definitely 'our district'. The High Street, itself now half a mile long, was linked more intimately than ever with its parent city, London; and Farringay contributed a street-acci-

dent nearly every week to the annals of progress. 'Yes, Mr Pandervil, the Lord is knocking at the door of your heart. Won't you let Him in?' Despite the pastor's wistful woeful look, Egg found in himself no response to this particular appeal: it was the kind of talk he didn't understand. The choir, sociability, an atmosphere of hearty friendship—this he understood better.

Mr Pierce was a youngish man with a great mane of brown hair, eagle eyes, and a voice like an American organ. Egg's friend Farthing didn't, he said, care for the fellow's look. 'Actressy!' said Mr Farthing. 'Besides, there's too much of him. Arms and legs like an octopus. Wants taking in a tuck or two, does your Reverend Pierce.' But by his own denominationalists Mr Pierce was considered to be a great Force for Righteousness; and there could be no disputing that he had 'got on'. He was militant in his Dissent. Instead of being content, as his predecessors had been, with a congregation of sixty or seventy redeemed souls, he went into the highways and hedges and compelled alien religionists to come in. By sensational preaching, and by visiting the tents of the ungodly as well as those of the faithful, he filled his little chapel to bursting-point. Carrie Pandervil, who for years had been ailing and peevish, found great satisfaction in the flash of his eyes, the deep rich drawl of his voice, and the dexterity with which he supplied a spiritual lesson for her every need. He persuaded her to come and hear him preach a sanguinary sermon on 'The Blood of Christ cleans-

eth us from all sin'; she listened with absorbed, gluttonous, hot-eyed attention; and so she was won for the Lord from the vain pomp and worldly ambitions and wicked papist ritual of the Church of England. Egg, as we have seen, was won by other means. He did not positively like the Reverend Shadrach; and, though he had become lax in church attendance (greatly to the scandal of his neighbours), he still cherished sentimental memories of Keyborough Parish Church. But these dissenting folk were such hearty handshakers, and made so much of a man who looked in for a Sunday or two out of mere curiosity, that it was difficult to rebuff them; and young Mr Pierce himself was so touchingly confident of always getting his own way that Egg had not the heart to disappoint him. Before he quite knew where he was, he had 'joined the church', a ceremony that reached its triumphant conclusion in a series of questions and answers, after this fashion:

'As I understand you, Mr Pandervil, you have expressed a spontaneous desire to enter the Lord's communion?'

'Er . . . that's right!' agreed Egg cheerfully.

'And you would wish me, his unworthy servant, to extend to you the Right Hand of Fellowship at our next divine service?'

'That's right!' said Egg again. 'Whatever's usual.'

'Mr Pandervil,' said the Pastor, 'this is a wonderful moment. There is great rejoicing in heaven at this moment. Hark!' Mr Pierce raised his

hands and eyes to the ceiling. 'Hark! I can almost hear the singing of the heavenly host, Mr Pandervil.' He gazed tenderly at his convert. 'Come let us thank the Lord together, for that he hath dealt mercifully with one who has been a great sinner.'

'Oh, I don't know about that,' said Egg modestly. 'Not really much in the great sinner line, you know.'

'Let us pray!' intoned the reverend gentleman, sliding round into a kneeling posture and propping his elbows on the chair he had just vacated. 'Let us pray, brother!'

'Oh, right you are!' said Egg, with cheerful alacrity. He hoped by this demeanour to conceal his momentary surprise and dismay. He was disappointed to find in himself nothing that responded to Mr Pierce's mood. He had experienced—perhaps half-a-dozen times in his life—moments of a rare strangeness and beauty: high impersonal moments touched with a degree of wonder that made him feel as though great music was being wrought in him. But the sight of Mr Pierce burrowing into his chair like a rabbit, the sight of Mr Pierce's black-trousered legs propped up on the toes of his large-booted feet—this did not recall those moments. Mr Pierce, an accredited agent of heaven, was addressing the Lord in prayer; and Egg, whose thoughts had broken beyond all decent control, could do nothing but hope that the Lord would not notice how extremely comical he and the parson, nosing the seats of their

chairs, must look. He became hot with a confusion of shame and reverence. He tried to echo in his own heart the prayer that was being said for him. And when it was over he remained kneeling for some moments out of sheer self-consciousness.

So it was that Egg Pandervil became a member of Ebenezer Chapel and a voice in Ebenezer choir. If he did not sing bass, he at least sang something that was not treble, not alto, and not tenor. He could master a simple tune without much trouble. After a month or two among the Ebenezerites he could (but would not) have sung you the air of any one of his dozen favourite hymns. But it was just the air that he must not sing; for him, a low baritone, there was more subtle work to be done. Having no sense of harmony he was hard put to it to hold his own against the three rival parts—especially the dangerous top-part—going on around him; and the musical score did not help him much, though he understood that here you must go up a bit and there you must go down, and that at the end of the verse you wait, if necessary, for the others to catch up with you. His brother-basses, though a feeble lot, were on the whole more help than the music. When he lost touch with them, it seemed safest to stick to two notes, or even, at a pinch, to groan his way through a whole hymn on one alone, provided that one was well-chosen—a low note, and not too loud.

After these vocal exercises he found it easier and pleasanter to spin his private reveries than to follow the Reverend Shadrach Pierce on his racket-

ing expeditions to hell and back. The fate of the wicked was the preacher's constant theme, and he eked out his shreds and tatters of doctrine with a gorgeous patchwork of histrionics. By way of illustration he one day pretended that his pulpit was a red-hot cage, and in trying to escape from it he burnt his hands so often and so convincingly that Egg could almost smell the roasting flesh. 'And that,' said Mr Pierce, 'will be the fate of the wicked—the idolater, the fornicator, the unbeliever—not for an hour, not for a day, not for a week, not for a month, not for a year—nay, not for a century only, but for all eternity!' It was dismal hearing, but Egg took it very little to heart, perhaps because he had never encountered any of these 'wicked' people of whom just lately he was hearing such sad accounts. He couldn't imagine any of the simple sinners of his acquaintance falling into that category or provoking such anger on the part of their Maker. No confessed unbeliever had ever come his way; not one of his neighbours had been caught bowing down to idols; and as for 'the fornicator', Egg had no precise notion of what the word meant, though he knew it to mean something unspeakable, bizarre, and utterly remote from ordinary experience. No doubt, in his mild way, he believed in hell, for he was none of your atheists; but he thought of hell as permanently empty—except perhaps for a devil or two by way of staff—empty and existing only as a warning to doubters and other desperadoes. He spent little time on this branch of theology, a science in which,

as we see, he had made no perceptible progress since boyhood. More often he thought of heaven, of family gatherings after death where he would find brother Willy, straight and smart in his red coat and grinning with happiness; and Mother, pouring out tea for everybody; and Father, still absent from them in mind, still looking wistfully for something beyond the horizon; and Algernon and all the sisters. Yes, and others would be there, others who even in heaven couldn't be fitted into any plausible scheme. Heaven would be better than nothing, but it would fall very short of his heart's desire.

At other times—for the tedium of the sermon had to be avoided somehow—he let his fancy stray as far as the Lord God himself. He thought of God as an old man, scholarly, gentle, and preoccupied—a man, indeed rather like his own father. Pictures of God's life in heaven floated to him unbidden and uncensored upon the tide of Mr Pierce's disregarded eloquence. God, in this fantasy of Egg's, spent his eternal day wandering about a large room lined with books, a rather stuffy room smelling of leather; wandering up and down, peering over his spectacles at this title or at that, taking down a book here, a book there, and at last, the choice made, sitting at the table with it to read it from end to end. It was Egg's old Sunday game, this fantasy, and it repeated itself, with variations, week after week. And one day, out of nowhere, there came the odd thought that these thousands of books were simply the lives of all the people in

the world, and that God was their author. Why does he read them, asked Egg, if he wrote them all himself? P'raps he's got a bad memory. I wonder what he thinks of us all? . . . But of course it was only fancy. God wasn't really like that at all. God was really—'Let us conclude the morning's worship by singing together Hymn Number . . .' The responsibility of being in the choir made it impossible for Egg to come to any definite conclusion about the true nature of God.

All things considered, the Ebenezer Chapel could certainly be counted among the pleasures of his life. And, if it did nothing else, it provided him with a sanctuary from Carrie. During that blessed hour-and-a-half every Sunday morning and evening, Carrie could not call out to him (in a voice so like her mother's!): 'Eggie dear! I'm in dreadful pain. But of course you don't care whether I live or die.' In chapel he was immune from this persecution; and Carrie, sitting in a pew with Mabe and Bobby and Harold, forgot her own sufferings in the enjoyment of her Saviour's. Mabe was now 'quite the young woman'; Bobby was fifteen and a winner of scholarships; Harold was ten and suety. Their mother took pride in them, if only the pride of possession; but their father continued to catch himself, in moments of unwariness, wondering why he had begotten them. He couldn't recall having wanted a wife, still less a family; yet here he was, amply provided with both. It's queer, the way things happen, he said to himself. Very queer it is. Now who'd a thought . . . ?

Egg was a chorister of twelve months' standing, and very much at home with the brethren though still shy of their peculiar religious idiom, when a fourth child was born to him. The affair was so ridiculous as to be almost a scandal; and it was just like Egg, said Carrie bitterly, to get her another at *her* age. For nearly ten years she had been 'lucky', and now, when a body might have supposed all danger past, she was 'caught'. The child was a boy, and they decided to call him Nicholas.

'Why Nicholas?' demanded old Mrs Noom, to whom Egg had been bidden carry the news.

'Why not Nicholas?' retorted Egg.

'Nicholas Noom or Nicholas Huggins?' asked she.

'Neither,' said Egg. 'Nicholas Pandervil. That's all. Now keep your hair on, Ma! You've had your turn. You've had it twice, as I see things. There's Mabel Noom Pandervil, and there's Robert Huggins Pandervil, and there's Harold Richard, called after his poor grandpa.'

'Nicholas!' Mrs Noom had lost all her teeth but one, and this last survivor lent a certain imbecile emphasis to her sneers. 'I never heard of such a name. But bless my soul, Egg Pandervil, the poor mite must be named *after* someone! You woont 'ave 'im a heathen, would you?' She brooded in silence for a while; then broke into grumbling speech again. 'Nicholas! There's never bin no Nicholas in our family, that I *will* say. And if I can't speak my mind to my own son-be-law, things 'ave come to a pretty pickle. Nicho-

las!—why, Old Nick 'imself is the only one *I* knows of.' She giggled, baring her one fang again. 'Hark at me!' she said, self-admiringly, with shrill laughter. '*Swearing* I am, and me a granny four times over!'

Nicholas began life as a puny child, and his mother had a grudge against him. She had contracted a permanent ill-temper which obliged her to take to her bed a week after her recovery from the effects of the confinement. And once back in bed she gave every sign of intending to stay there, doing unto others as she—in her own mother's reign—had 'been done by', filling the house not with the sound but with the nervous expectancy of dramatic crisis and lamentation. She would call in a weary singsong tone to husband or to daughter, and, when one of them came to find out what she wanted, she would smile sourly and give this respondent a piece of her mind. It was not, we must hope, a large piece; for there was kindness and courage somewhere dormant in her, and Egg had seen flashes of both, though not so many as he chose both privately and publicly to pretend. Ah, she knew she was a nuisance, she would say, and she prayed that God would forgive them for wishing to be rid of her, for it was only natural, but meanwhile, if she could have a little food sometimes, it would help her to bear up. You're more like your Ma every day, thought Egg—not for the first time, nor yet for the second. And he could hardly be blamed for feeling that young Nicky, the cause of this last manifestation, had put

in a most untimely appearance. Nor did the child make any visible effort to get himself beloved. He cried a great deal; and with Carrie so tiresome, and Mabe gluttonous of sleep after drudging in house and shop all day, the burden of getting out of bed two or three times a night, to feed the baby or rock the baby or carry the baby up and down the room, fell upon Egg's shoulders. The more of these attentions Nicky got, the more regularly and confidently did he demand them; and as time went on, Egg found himself becoming quite unexpectedly and preposterously fond of his torturer. When Nicky reached the age of two it became evident to a discerning eye that he was a Pandervil, the first in this family. One day that comical knob in the middle of his tiny face would become a straight, small, delicately shaped, Pandervil nose. He's going to be like Father to look at, thought Egg; and the flame of vicarious ambition kindled in him. Perhaps the boy would be brainy like Father, too; a scholar, a reader of books. Egg derided himself for daring to entertain such ill-founded hopes. What chance had the son of a struggling grocer!

From bitterness such as this the Ebenezer Chapel was something of a refuge, and for that reason he was shy of anything that might seem to imperil his position as a respected chapel-going citizen. This makes it all the more surprising that he should have behaved as he did to the glossy gentleman who kindly came down from London with the most generous proposals to him. He appeared,

this glossy gentleman, on the morning following a particularly disturbed and unhappy night; and he was received in the parlour, while Mabe attended to customers. He was the most radiant person Egg had ever seen. His boots sparkled; his eyes glinted behind gold-rimmed pince-nez; his teeth flashed goldenly; and his speech was like honey from the honeycomb.

'I see,' said Egg. 'If you'll excuse me a minute I'll just have a word with my wife about it. But I'm sure she'll say no, same as I do.'

'That would be very misguided policy,' returned the glossy gentleman, staring tenderly at the crease in his trousers. 'If I might suggest, as a friend. . . .'

Egg did not much like his visitor. 'I won't keep you more than a minute,' he said. And in very little more than a minute he was back reiterating his decision not to sell Pandervil's Stores to the large and important firm represented by the glossy gentleman.

'You won't even consider the matter?' The glossy gentleman couldn't believe his ears. 'Let me persuade you.' Egg shook his head, and moved suggestively towards the door. 'I could mention a figure that would interest you.'

Egg led the way back into the shop, where his visitor was forced to follow him. 'No figures would interest me. Thanks all the same.'

'Then I shall be put to a great deal of trouble,' murmured the glossy gentleman, in a sad, insinuating tone. 'Do you know what I shall do, Mr

Pennyvil? I shall take a note of all your prices. At whatever sacrifice I shall procure other and better premises uncomfortably near to you. And I shall undercut you. We are a very big organization, and we can afford to lose money for ten years. Does that amuse you, Mr Pennyvil?'

Egg stared in surprise at the smiling face that so blandly interrogated him. The meaning of what was being said to him slowly cohered in his mind. And then he experienced, for the third time in this history, one of those rare moments of release from his world of diffidence and hesitancy into a kind of madness.

'And I tell you what *I'll* do, mister,' he said, in rising tones. 'I tell you what *I'll* do.' he repeated excitedly. His eyes were blazing, his fists clenched. 'I'll PUNCH YOU ON THE NOSE!'

He punched, and punched mightily, feeling that he was somehow, by this violence, taking a sort of revenge on all the circumstances that had tricked and trapped him into becoming what he was become. The glossy gentleman roared and backed away; his pince-nez clattered to the floor. Then Egg's brain cleared; the mists rolled away; and he perceived that he had behaved in a ridiculous, an undignified, indeed a criminal way. He was suddenly ashamed. Yet in the midst of this shame he recalled, with exultation, that absurd battle-cry: I'll punch you on the nose. And for the life of him he couldn't help grinning. But the grave face of Mr Farthing checked his mirth. How long had Farthing been in the shop?

'You saw!' spluttered the glossy gentleman. 'I claim you as a witness.'

'Yes, sir.' Farthing was surprisingly ready to oblige. 'I saw everything. I saw this man here punch you on the nose. And a right hard punch it was, if I'm any judge.'

'I shall charge him,' said the stranger. 'You saw everything. You saw everything. You're my witness.'

'I saw everything,' agreed Farthing, 'and I heard everything. If you'll come across the road with me, sir, my missus will mop you up a bit. My, that was a good hard punch, that was. A dangerous fellow, to be sure!'

For days Egg was haunted by one recurrent fear: I shall have to leave the choir. They'll never want to speak to me again, those chapel folk. And he wondered if the Reverend Shadrach Pierce, when he had referred to him as 'a great sinner', had had in mind some highly coloured account of how, many years ago, he had flung his aged mother-in-law into a cab . . . And in due time he appeared in court to answer for his misdemeanour. In the witness-box Mr Farthing, that grey-haired respectable tradesman, claimed to have seen everything. He knew the defendant well, but would rather not say whether or not he had always been on friendly terms with him. Pressed on this point, he admitted that he had had words with defendant on the very morning of the alleged assault, but insisted that he was not prejudiced.

'Now let us get this clear, Mr Farthing. Are we to understand that you saw the encounter between defendant and plaintiff? That you were present throughout the proceedings?'

'Yes.'

'The defendant pleads gross provocation. Did you see anything that could properly be so described?'

'Well, sir . . .' Mr Farthing shrugged his shoulders. 'Oh, it don't amount to anything.'

Mr Farthing was sternly asked what he meant.

'If I was to say,' said Mr Farthing, 'if I was to say as the gentleman *hit* Mr Pandervil first, I would be telling you a lie. For hitting and kicking are two very different things, aren't they now? And I'm not saying that Mr Pandervil didn't deserve to be kicked. And I'm not saying. . . .'

Did witness assert that he saw the plaintiff kick the defendant? Yes. And was this kick delivered before the defendant's alleged assault on the plaintiff? Yes. Would witness, remembering that he was on oath, describe this kick more exactly?

'It was what I should call,' said Mr Farthing reluctantly, 'a kick on the behind. But I wouldn't call it provocation. Not for a punch like that, I wouldn't.'

And so justice was betrayed; Mr Farthing was perjured; and Mr Pandervil retained his office in the Ebenezer choir.

2

Of the sixteen perspiring mortals crammed into that inadequate parlour and overflowing into the kichen beyond, Bob Pandervil alone—young Bobby, grown older, and self-shorn of his tender and belittling suffix—seemed unaffected by the general excitement. It was his twenty-first birthday party, and everybody else was preparing to make the best of it. Those of the guests for whom chairs had been found were selfconsciously sitting in them; the rest were lined up against the walls trying to look as though they preferred standing. Between these two parties there was a constant exchange of polite offers and friendly chaff. 'Do come an' 'ave a bit of a sit-down, Daniel. Ern'll make room for you, won't you, Ern?' 'Mustn't sit down, Aunty Min. Fraid of losing me appetite.' There was general laughter at this, the more hearty because Daniel Finch, Mabe's middle-aged fishmonger husband, was not a man much given to jocularity. He was lean, cadaverous, morose; he had a habit of eyeing women with an emphasis that was apt to give offence; no one but Mabe knew, though more than one guessed, why Mabe had ever consented to marry him; and in Egg's eyes he was an unqualified disaster. Next to Daniel Finch stood Mabe herself, stubbornly refusing a chair, and saying at intervals to chosen auditors: 'Remember *my* twenty-first birthday party, Aunty Min? What, you don't! Well, that aint surprising, after all, seeing I never 'ad none.'

Aunty Min, sometimes called Algernon's Min, was a spare, spry, darkish woman nearing sixty, whom nature had apparently designed as a foil to Algernon's rosy corpulence. She could not rest long in her seat, but must be for ever darting to and fro, lending a hand here and having a word there, and passing the time of day with fellow-revellers so distant, and so decidedly cut off from her, as to have been inaccessible to a woman less nimble of body or less resolute in geniality. She was childless, and by that fact disappointed; but her inextinguishable cheerfulness—a thing so unwarranted, so absurd, that people couldn't but laugh when they encountered it—made her a general favourite. Already, fifteen minutes after her arrival at the party, she was being called 'Aunty Min' by all the young men present, among whom were Ern Farthing and smart Alf Catch.

'It's going to be a very brisk little party,' said Uncle Algy approvingly. 'I can see that. What do *you* say, Mr Farthing, sir? A very brisk little party, hey? Same as my wife here—hey, old lady? Ha ha ha! A brisk little party same as my Min . . . Eggie old boy, didjer hear that one, old son? I was saying to Mr Farthing here . . . ' Algy was in great form, in spite of an occasional twinge of gout which he advertised with a waggish catcall; and his little jokes were well received, especially by Ern Farthing, who having nothing to say for himself was eager to laugh at anything and everything, and by Alf Catch, the butcher's son. These two youths had been Bob's schoolfellows; yet what

a distance there was between them: the one so spruce and debonair—his tie-pin alone must have cost half the price of a pig—and the other such a slowcoach, such a quiet pedestrian fellow! It was notorious that Ern Farthing couldn't say boo to a goose, and, if the invitations had been left to Bob, Ern's claim to a seat at the party might have been overlooked. But here he was, for old times' sake, and his father and mother were with him, to say nothing of three negligible elder sisters.

'You'll keep your eye on that girl of yours, Mr Algernon, if you take my advice.' It was the voice of Mr Farthing, whose white hairs now commanded, among friends, the admiring attention once given to his jokes.

'I didn't quite catch you, Mr Farthing, old friend.'

Mr Farthing tried again: 'That girl of yours, I said, that lively young party you was speaking of, you better keep an eye on her, Mr Algy, with these 'ere young men about.' Everybody laughed. Mr Farthing, failing to catch Algernon's eye, rose with an effort from his chair and leaned across the table: 'Mr Algy, a word with you.'

'Hey? Certainly, old friend!'

'What I wanta say, don't take me amiss, that's all. What I said about your good lady here. Nothing personal, y'know. No, no, no. Just my chaffing way, that's all.' The two rival humorists solemnly shook hands, and Mr Farthing resumed his seat.

'Ah, but there's a face I'd like to have seen here,'

said Carrie, with the air of continuing the conversation. 'And that's dear old Mr Pummice's face.' For Carrie, too, was at her son's party, having left her bed of sickness and pain for the express purpose of 'seeing to everything'. And she had brought her party manners with her, a curious blend of hospitable gaiety and sad unction. 'Ah, well, we must all come to it in the Lord's good time,' said she.

'What, old Mr Pummice gone?' said Uncle Algernon. 'I hadn't heard!'

Farthing nodded. 'This twelvemonth or more. The yella jarnders, it was. Why,' added Mr Farthing in a tone of pleased reminiscence, 'your brother and me was bearers!'

Mr Pummice was not the only neighbour who would never again see the sun shining or the rain falling on Farringay High Street, and for a while the talk turned on death. 'Ah,' sighed Carrie, the pride of the Ebenezerites, 'and I know who'll be the next to be taken. And if it's the Lord's will, I'm ready . . . Now where's that dratted Elp! Sleena! Come 'ere, girl, with that teapot! Where are you running off to *now*, pray? If I've told you once I've told you *twenty* times . . . ' Selina Bush, the Elp, had been engaged at the age of seventeen to take Mabe's place as general household drudge. She was now a very mature twenty-two, a thin slip of a girl, rather pretty in a colourless fashion, and at her best just after her face had been washed. Nothing could have exceeded her

devotion to Nicky and Egg, between whom and the wrath of Carrie she eagerly interposed her simple personality.

'Say, Eggie old man! What a pity old Sarah and old Ernest couldn't a come! And the girls too.' By 'the girls' Algy meant his four younger sisters who—some married, some virgin, all out of sight and generally out of mind—were scattered to the four points of the compass.

Egg deplored the remark, for he had taken care not to expose himself to rebuff by asking Sarah—who was, after all, a real Vicar's wife—to attend her nephew's celebrations. 'Oh, Sarah's not so well nowadays, I fancy,' he said. 'Nor so young as she was, come to think of it.'

Egg contributed a remark to the general noise whenever he could think of anything to say, and at other times, nervously affable, he laughed and murmured rather vaguely, and to no one in particular: 'Splendid! Splendid!' He, in common with these others, and with Harold and Nicky and the two strange young men described as 'Bob's business friends', was more or less enjoying the festive confusion. Bob himself, you would have said, carried the only perfectly cool head among them. If numbers counted for anything it would be a highly successful party.

The feast was called high tea; and the viands included ham, pork pie, boiled eggs, sardines, pressed beef sandwiches, bread and butter, various jams, and a magnificent birthday cake made by

Mother for Mother's Boy. Accompanying these dainties was a generous supply of dark brown tea, tea with a tang to it, under whose stimulating influence Carrie Pandervil, getting the ear of the company by addressing herself intimately to each member in turn, discoursed largely of life and motherhood and what it meant to be tied down, as you might say, to your bed. 'First it come on in the small of the back, Aunty Min, and then it spread itself up round the side of me—no, not the left side, the right side—and what with this place and that place and the other place, soon it was pains all over. What do you think of that, Mr Farthing! Pains all over it was. But there!—I mustn't sit here talking about my alimence. I'm only telling *you,* Uncle Algy, because you're a man of the world and understands things, and a better uncle never breathed as I'm sure my boy will bear me out. 'Ave a bit more of this pie, Ern, do! What, finished already! Couldn't so much as *look* at food, Aunty Min, when them pains was at their worst. Could I, Mabe? Your Uncle Algy understands what sickness is, him with his poor gout. And you, Daniel boy, and you, I daresay, Alf Catch, young as you are and strong too by God's blessing, *you* understand that a person doesn't take any pleasure in being ill and lying a-bed when they might be up and doing, as poor Mr Pummice used to say, if only they had their health and strength. Another cup of tea, Alf? *That's* right. All over my back the pains come,

Aunty Min, and in my stomach too. Not what I'd call a *gnoring* pain, Uncle Algy, but a sort of nagging, *achey* pain. A sort of *achey* pain, Mr Farthing. And sometimes in the middle of the night I feel as I can't bear this cross a minute longer, what with giving so much trouble and being in the way, as I can't help seeing, not being a blind bat. Sometimes, as my Mabe well knows—don't you, ducky?—I feel as though . . . Daddy! Why don't you cut Mr Farthing another slice of cake! It's there to be eaten, Mr Farthing, you know. It don't want saving for the birds.'

Mr Farthing held up an arresting hand. 'No, Egg, my dear fellow.' At last—startling innovation!—these old friends addressed each other familiarly. 'Not another crumb, Mrs P, thanking you all the same as I'm sure we all do. I've done splendidly. A fair treat, I'm sure. And great praise due to the cook!'

Everybody applauded this sentiment.

'Ah!' sighed Carrie, smiling round the table. 'It's nice to be among friends who'll take us as they find us. When I was younger . . . '

'When you was younger, Mrs P,' interposed old Farthing, with a bow, 'you'd a made two large cakes instead of one large cake. And when I was younger I'd 'ave eaten the blessed lot.'

'Ha ha ha!' roared Uncle Algy. 'I see your meaning, Mr Farthing, sir.' He winked at Mr Farthing, as though to say that this was the kind of joke that only a connoisseur could fully appre-

ciate. 'I take your point, old friend. Ha ha ha!'

'Well,' said Carrie, 'if you've really all finished, and won't change your minds, Sleena can clear the things away . . . Sleena, where you got to, girl?'

'Your clock right, Eggie, old son?' asked Uncle Algy. 'Bit fast according to me.'

'Ten minutes fast as near as nothing,' said Egg. 'Or so I fancy. Perhaps Bob here could tell us the exact time. Eh, Bob?'

This was considered very cunning of Egg, and won him great applause, for everybody knew that Uncle Algy and Aunty Min had given Bob a magnificent watch for his birthday; and this was the sign for that young man to pull it out of his pocket and expose it to the admiration of the company.

'Stuff and nonsense, my boy!' said Uncle Algy, with hearty depreciation of his gift. 'You deserve something better than that, from what I hear of you. What, is it still going! Well, I *am* surprised! D'ye hear that, Min? That twopenny ha'penny bit of a brass ticker is still going.'

'Get along with you, Uncle Algy!' cried Mabe, leading the protestants. '*That's* never brass. That's *gold*, that is. And well you know it.'

Uncle Algy resolutely turned his back on the temptation to embroider the theme. 'Yes, Eggie old son, I hear great things of Master Bob. Bray-vo, *Bob!* Not content with scholarships in galore, me lord must needs go and crown all by

getting a high-class little job in an office! Isn't that the idea, Bob my boy?'

'Yes, Uncle,' said Bob indifferently. 'Estate agents. Not much at first, but it may lead to something better.'

Someone gave Egg a nudge. It was Mr Farthing. 'Who d'ye think I had a letter from 'smorning, Egg Pandervil?'

'Dunno,' said Egg.

'You'd never guess!'

'Woont I?' said Egg, with a grin. 'Then you tell me, friend. It'll save time.'

'Wimmett!' said Mr Farthing explosively.

'Go on! Not Wimmett!'

'Yes, Wimmett himself.'

'Well I never!' exclaimed Egg. 'Wimmett himself! And whatta *dee* got to say?'

'Message for you,' said Mr Farthing. 'Member me to all old friends, specially Mr Pandervil. Seems he's got some sort of a regular job at last, warehouseman up in the city. Keeps things going but they 'ave to live in two rooms—yes, the whole dang lot of them . . . Well, of course they've the two girls out in service now, so that's something.'

'Hard,' ruminated Egg. 'Man of his age, y'know. Must be a tidy bit past sixty.'

'Ay, sixty-six or seven he'll be as I figure it. About a year behind me he was. Member how he used to call himself the Honourable So-and-so Wimmett? And *laugh* at himself for it, so's you'd a thought he would a *died* o' laughing. And slap

'is knee. He was a great knee-slapper, was Mr Wimmett.'

The two friends contemplated in silence for a while this rather surprising picture of a man who had seemed to most people quite the reverse of robust and jocular. But Egg made allowanes for his friend's view. Mr Farthing had always been a great joker, and Mr Wimmett had always laughed uproariously at his jokes.

'A saddish sort of man in a way,' ventured Egg.

'In a way,' conceded Mr Farthing reluctantly. 'I wonder,' he added, 'how it began, that little joke of his about the Honourable So-and-so Wimmett?'

'Oh, that! Some nonsense of mine, I believe . . . I forget,' said Egg, remembering. 'Wasn't much of a joke anyhow . . . Who's that trying to knock the house down, I wonder?'

'Someone at the door, Daddy!' cried Carrie sharply.

But young Harold had already gone out of the room to find out what was the matter. He presently returned, followed by slow footsteps and an ominous tap-tap of a stick. Harold held open the door; everybody stopped talking and looked up, half in alarm; so that Mrs Noom achieved just the entry that in the days of her prime she would have desired. She stood in the doorway blinking at the sudden light; for the parlour was illuminated and the journey through the 'hall passage' had been a dark journey, with

only a distant gleam to guide her. Even now, it seemed, she could not see the company very distinctly; for at first she stared up at the ceiling as though she had been a blind woman. In this attitude she waited, listening. Her face, so aged and frail and sunken in the cheeks, was enigmatic, giving no hint at all of what was in her mind. Because so old, because she might—one felt—at any moment drop dead, she was an intimidating spectacle; and the silence, persisting for several seconds after her entry, was a reluctant tribute to that fact.

She opened her mouth to speak, baring her one tooth. 'Well, my dears! You're not very pleased to see Granny, I'll be bound!'

'Why, Ma,' said Egg, moving forward to greet her, 'we'd quite given you up! Still, better late than never, you know. Eh?' He laughed nervously.

The ancient woman now lowered her gaze from the ceiling and stared about her, scanning the faces of the guests. 'What's the matter with 'em all?' she asked Egg. 'Aint they got tongues in their 'eads?'

'Here's a chair for you, Granny,' said Bob. 'Won't you sit down?'

'Who's dead?' inquired Mrs Noom. With help from Egg she slowly lowered herself into the chair. 'Who did you say it was, Egg? I've lasted them out, whoever they are.' She tittered feebly. 'He he he! I've lasted them out.'

'It's Bob's birthday,' said Egg. 'We're having a party for him. You remember, Ma! We come and tell you only last week. Bob's twenty-one to-day.'

'Bob?' Mrs Noom wrinkled again her wrinkled brow. 'Bob, d'you say? Now which Bob would that be? Did he make a nice corpse?'

Egg wished the others wouldn't sit and stare so curiously and silently. 'Rubbish, old lady!' he said. 'It's our Bob's birthday, I tell you. Birthday. Your grandson, our Bob.'

'My grandson! My little Bobby!' She dabbed at her eyes with a wad of handkerchief. 'And nobody even told me he was sadly, poor lamb!'

Egg, with the assistance of Bob himself, began again at the beginning of the story. But in the middle of their joint narration the inner door opened and Carrie entered, followed by Mabe, and, timidly, by Selina Bush.

'Is that my dear Carrie?' cried Mrs Noom. 'She *will* be pleased to see me, bless 'er kind 'eart!'

'Ma! 'Owever did *you* get here?' Carrie ran forward and kissed her mother.

'On my legs, girl. First one foot, then the other.'

'Why, you might 'ave caught your death a night like this! So late and all. Why, it's eight o'clock nearly. Isn't it, Bob darling? Show Granny your beautiful watch, do, that your Uncle Algy and your Aunty Min give you.'

Mrs Noom laughed satirically. 'She's my

daughter, she is.' No one answering her she leaned pointedly towards Mrs Farthing. 'I say, she's my daughter.'

Mrs Farthing smiled vaguely and uttered soothing noises. 'Yes, yes, Mrs Noom. Of course she is.'

'That's why she turned me out into the street. Twenty year ago, a bitter winter's morning.'

'What's she telling you?' cried Carrie.

'I'm talking to Mrs Thingummy here,' said Mrs Noom sharply. 'I'll thank you to hold your tongue, my girl. And when her own father was dying, dying on his deathbed he was, d'you know what she done, that fine daughter of mine? You don't. Well, I'll tell you. Wouldn't come near 'im, she wouldn't, no, not with me begging and praying her on me bended knees, she wouldn't. That's dear Carrie, that is . . . Bobby, where's my Bobby? I've said my say, and enough's enough.'

She trembled to her feet and stood swaying. 'It's been a treat to see you all so happy,' she said, staring at the ceiling. 'Good night, my dears! I'm not dying on you this time. That's to come.' Tittering, supported by Bob's arm, she moved slowly back into the darkness.

3

When the last guest was gone, and Carrie and Bob had retired to their beds, Egg heaved a deep

sigh and began performing his customary ritual of winding the big clock and making sure that all doors and windows were fast. Seeing a thread of light under the scullery door, he deduced that Selina had not yet finished the washing-up, and in his slippered feet—quietly, afraid of disturbing the household—he glided through the kitchen to remonstrate with her, being at once impatient and sympathetic. The door yielded to his push, and Selina's home, thirty-six square feet of bleakness and squalor, was revealed to him. Selina was bending over the sink, from which rose the steam and smell of greasy hot water. In her right hand she held a wet dishcloth; with the other she was feebly fending off the teasing amorous attentions of Egg's second son Harold. Her face was averted from the boy, the tip of her nose being within half-an-inch of the plate-rack on her right. Before Egg could make his presence known, the situation quickly resolved itself. 'Oh 'ave it your own way then!' cried Selina indulgently. She turned her face to Harold, received his kiss on her mouth, and pushed him away with motherly decisiveness. 'Now leave me be!'

'Harold, whad you doing 'ere!' Egg felt shocked and ashamed and perhaps a little excited. Yes, he was excited, slightly but indubitably, and it was that which made him ashamed. That young good-for-nothing Harold! He must be taught a lesson, by God he must! 'How dare you!' shouted Egg angrily. How dare you!' The im-

pudence of it, the impudence! The easy careless way she had offered her mouth, her young mouth! It was beautiful, terrible, disgraceful. And it must be put a stop to at once. We can't have this kind of thing going on. Ah, if only we could! 'Be off with you, sir! Be off to bed at once. And . . . and . . . and you'll sweep that shop out in the morning at six o'clock—six o'clock d'you hear?—or I'll know the reason why.' Such things to happen in a respectable house! He glared at Harold. Harold, with flaming face and downcast eyes, slouched past him and away.

'As for you, Selina!' Egg could think of nothing adequate to say. He could only say: 'I'm surprised at you. Your ma shall hear of this, let me tell you!'

Sniffing loudly, and dropping tears into the greasy water, Selina made pretence at getting on with her work.

'And I think,' said Egg, 'you better take a month's notice.'

He spoke almost without intention, and largely at random. He was saying the things that he supposed ought to be said, the things—some of them—that Carrie would have said in his place. What he said came not from himself but from some piece of automatic mechanism in his mind. He himself was in the grip of quite other thoughts. He was hunted, bewildered. He saw himself as a kind of satyr running naked and joyous in a wood, and he was horrified at the sight. How

could a man at his age think such thoughts! He had almost forgotten Selina, but he remembered —though not the phrase—'the women of the Seraglio'. A moment ago he had hated Selina, and hated Harold, for the discomfort they had caused him, for making him an eavesdropper, for dropping a spark of madness into the dry dangerous tinder of his heart. But he hated her no longer. She was nothing after all—a mere blubbering drab of a girl.

That last threat of his made her turn and face him. She was appalled and reproachful. 'You woont do that, Mr Pandervil! You'd never turn me out, and me a Banana girl!'

'Whadja mean?' Anger was lost in curiosity. 'I don't understand you.'

'Doctor Banana zomes,' said Selina. 'I aint got any Mars and Pars, and never 'ad. You oughta know that. You'd never turn me out when I 'aven't done no 'arm!'

He realized that what she said by way of an appeal was in fact no more than the sober truth. He wouldn't and couldn't turn her out, and never for one moment had he intended to do so. He had frightened the girl; he had struck a blow for proper behaviour, made an effective protest against 'goings-on'; and that was enough. What remained to be said was more practical.

'Now look here, Selina, let this be a lesson to you, my girl. No one wants to be 'ard on you, I'm sure. It's more the boy's fault than yours, I

could see that right enough. But there's to be no more of it, see? I'm telling you for your own good, see? What I mean to say you better mind yourself. He's not a boy now, not 'ardly. He's getting on for a man, sixteen and more, and once you let him start taking liberties . . . well, just you mind what I tell you.' The picture of that swift kissing mouth flashed in and out of his mind as he added: 'Apart from what's right and proper, 'tisn't safe. See?'

'Jou mean,' said Selina, 'as I won't 'ave to go away? I *will* be good, Mr Pandervil. Straight I will. It was on'y to stop 'im worriting of me while I was about me work I did it. You going to let me stay, Mr Pandervil?' A fresh storm of weeping shook her.

'Oh, be done with that crying set-out!' Egg spoke sharply, his nerves quivering. 'You've no call to cry, Selina. We're not turning you out, no such thing. Bless my soul 'aven't you gotta 'anker-chief, girl! 'Ere, take mine and for mercy's sake use it!' The weeping became more copious. 'And what's the matter with you now! Stop it, can't you!'

Selina raised her wet, red, quivering face. 'You're so g-g-good to me!' she blubbered. 'You always b-b-bin so good.'

'What about getting these crocks washed?' retorted Egg, severely. 'My, you're a pretty sight. If your Doctor Banana saw you now, Selina, he'd 'ave a fit, that's what he'd 'ave. Here—*I'll* do them. You get along to your bed, a girl your age!'

He snatched the dishcloth from her hand and turned towards the sink.

'Having a nice time, Eggie dear, you and Selina?'

Carrie, muffled in a dressing-gown, stood in the doorway. A venomous smile twisted her lips.

'I'm glad,' said Carrie, 'you 'ad the sense to send Harold away before you started.' She turned on Selina. 'What are you waiting for, madam? Me 'usband won't be wanting you again to-night.'

Alone in the scullery, husband and wife confronted each other. Egg, with his back against the sink, stood at bay, pale, angry, and frightened: frightened because he so bitterly hated scenes, and a scene was always the weapon with which Carrie punished his real or imaginary negligences and misdeeds. There was a twinge, too, of guilt in him, guilt for nothing that he had done or intended but—for what? He didn't know. He felt wretched, desperate, even murderous; perhaps in that moment he came as near as he could ever come to murder, for he caught himself thinking how easily with his strong hands he could strangle this alien woman and fling her out of his life for ever.

Shocked by this thought he became eager to defend himself.

'I caught Harold . . .' But he left the sentence unfinished. He rejected that baseness. What Harold had done seemed no longer an impropriety to be bruited and execrated, but a confidence that he must respect.

'Well? You caught Harold. . . .'

'Caught Harold! Nothing of the sort. I found him here, that's all. Helping the girl wash up, he was. I sent him to bed, seeing it was so late.'

'I thought as much.' Carrie was ominously quiet; she was working herself up to boiling-point; in a moment or two, he knew, she would scream at him. 'And then, after 'e'd gorn, my precious 'usband stayed and helped little Sleena with her work, I s'pose. Is that the story, Eggie dear?'

'No,' said Egg. 'It isn't.' A mood akin to madness took possession of him. I'll have no more of it, he said to himself. I'll teach her a lesson, I will. 'That isn't the story at all, my dear. You wanta know what I bin doing down here with Sleena. Well, I'm going to tell you.' He shook with excitement. 'This is what I bin doing. You listen to me, Carrie, and you'll hear. This is what I bin doing.' His eyes blazed at her. 'I bin making love to the girl. I bin kissing and cuddling of her and . . . I bin making love to her, see? And tomorrow I'm going to do it again, see? So now you know.'

Carrie stared, and the scream came at last. 'Liar!' she cried. His face changed, and she repeated, with new conviction: 'Liar! You'd never dare! You 'aven't got the sperit.' She laughed harshly. 'Think you can fool me, do you!'

'So that's it, is it!' Egg, emptied of his devil, could do nothing but state the obvious. 'If you're so sure of me, why d'you come along with your nasty talk about me and Sleena!'

She could not answer that. For once in his life with her he had the last word. But it profited him nothing. Her barb had carried with it a subtle poison; for he was more than disconcerted, he was shamed, by her instant disbelief in his confession. Was he truly a man without spirit? Ought he from the first to have cuffed and beaten her into respecting him? It was too late for that now, he reflected. But the reflection was only half-sincere, for he knew in his heart that he could never have done quite that.

On the way upstairs she slipped her arm into his and touched his hand. For the moment they were friends again, and at once he became busy with excuses for her misconduct; and then, putting that out of mind, he said pensively, thinking back to that happy past of his invention: 'My word, we've bin a few times up these stairs together, you and me.' She said nothing, and they went together through the darkness to their bedroom, where a lighted candle greeted them. She flung herself wearily into bed and turned her face to the wall. He glanced at her in surprise. She was weeping, and weeping, it seemed, from the heart, for there was no parade or lamentation.

'Anything wrong, Carrie?'

He went over to her and touched the lump she made of the bedclothes. She put her hands up and hid her face. He became alarmed.

'What's the matter, my dear?' Irresolutely he patted her shoulder.

She said nothing; she continued to hide her face.

After staring in perplexity for some minutes he began mechanically undressing. Moving to the chest of drawers to put his collar studs in their accustomed place for the night, he caught sight in the mirror of a grey-whiskered, elderly man, with a pointed chin, a high bald brow, and large dark bewildered eyes. The studs dropped with a tinkle into their saucer.

'Eggie!'

He turned round. Carrie had uncovered her face.

'Yes,' he said, coming again to the bedside.

She gave him a long look. 'D'you wish you'd a never married me?'

'Whatever makes you ask a thing like that,' he said. 'After twenty-eight years of it too!'

She was answered, and perhaps she knew it. He hoped she didn't. 'Yes, there's something you sorta keep back.'

'You've no call to say that, my dear. I don't 'ave any secrets from you. You're not still thinking about that Sleena, are you?'

'No, tisn't a secret I mean. I can't explain. But there's something, something of yourself. You keep it back. You've always kep' it back. Oh, I dunno. Get into bed, do.'

He got into bed, and lay trembling with apprehension of further questioning. And when that fear passed, with Carrie sleeping audibly at his side, he began asking himself what he had done with his life and Carrie's and what she had contributed to that doing, and how things might have

been different between them, and whether . . . And so on a tide of confused wonderings came sleep, the familiar magic that hushes all questions and answers none.

And in the morning Carrie was herself again.

4

Egg had never been encouraged to pay much attention to his daughter. Mabe was decidedly Mother's Girl, just as Bobby was Mother's Boy, and Egg had not, perhaps, been altogether displeased with his consequent isolation in the family, though he did sometimes say to himself that in the Noom household things had been t'other way about. But when Mabe was removed from him by marriage, becoming thereby a new person and one who could be seen with a certain detachment, he fell to thinking about her, wondering what she, in her private mind, was like, and whether marriage for her had proved bitter or sweet or just nothing at all. It surprised him to realize that though he had lived under one roof with his daughter for nearly a quarter of a century he could recall no intimate or revealing conversation with her. Was it his fault or hers? She was a stranger to him, but because he had not until now recognized her as a stranger he had never troubled to get to know her. Yet she was, after all, a person; and behind that plump, sullen, rather stupid face of hers, which he had perfunctorily kissed some ten or twenty thousand times, the mysterious process of

thought went on. Although for the first week or two of her marriage he had missed her about the house, and wished her back again, she had never been really important to him; but it flashed into his mind now—with all the startling brilliance of a new idea—that to herself she was all-important, that to herself she was 'I', just as he to himself was 'I'. He blinked at this revelation, tried to find words for it, got them, lost them, and was left desolate. The glamorous bubble of his little idea was pricked, and, as he served old Miss Hunt, the postmistress, with a bottle of his Own Special Peppermint Wine (try it for your indigestion), he was dismally wondering what it was that had so subtly pleased him a moment before.

'Pleasant morning, Miss Hunt!'

'Beautiful, isn't it, Mr Pandervil! Well, it was time we 'ad a bit of spring weather after that bitter wind. It fair nipped me up. What are your cream biscuits to-day?'

As he told her the price—the unvarying price—of his cream biscuits, Mabe slunk into the shop. 'How do, Miss Hunt! Nice day!' Miss Hunt went out. 'Hallo, Pa! Mar in?' An idle question, for Ma was never out.

'In?' echoed Egg jocularly. 'In bed, d'ye mean? I expect you'll find her about the kitchen somewhere. She's a bit better this morning.' He could tell by Mabe's demeanour that she had brought a load of trouble with her, and that mother and daughter would have a happy miserable hour pick it over. 'Anything wrong, my girl?'

She looked surprised and a trifle indignant. Her face took on the expression of a sick mule. 'I'll go and find Ma,' said Mabe.

Egg knew himself rejected; and so strong was the influence of his new mood of self-searching that for a while he felt hurt about it, reluctant to face the fact that it was now too late to start making friends with his daughter. Some trouble between her and that Daniel, he thought, and tried to dismiss it from his mind, consoling himself—it was rich consolation—with remembering that to-night young Nicky was to have his weekly bath, and that, in relief of the scandalously overworked Selina, he himself, the surprised father, would supervise that orgy of laughter and splashing and boat-sailing. With Nicky, at least, he had lost no time in making friends, once it had dawned on him—a shy, gradual brightening of his sky—that of all the household he himself was the fittest and the favourite companion of this queer agreeable child; that under the surface of their intercourse, the confidences and the gaiety and the scoldings, something vibrated between them quick and delicate and never to be spoken. This anticipated pleasure coloured all his morning, and made weighing and packing and invoicing and passing the time of day with customers, a series of almost purely mechanical operations.

Just as the clock struck one, Bob came into the shop, a Bob stripped, it seemed, of his customary self-assurance. 'Say, Dad, I want a word with you. D'you think we could go and have a bite

together somewhere? Pardoe's is a pretty decent place. I . . . I got something I want to tell you.'

Egg, to hide his astonishment and alarm, attempted a casual evasion. 'What do we want to go and spend eighteenpence at Pardoe's for, when there's our own food waiting in the kitchen?'

'We can't talk in the kitchen.'

'Can't we?' said Egg. He knew he was being foolish and awkward; but this son so often made him feel that. 'First I've heard of it.'

'Oh, you know what I mean,' said Bob. 'Come on, Dad. Be a sport.'

A thrill travelled up Egg's spine, a thrill that mingled new friendliness with a kind of pride. His smart son, the estate agent's clerk, was inviting him, on terms of equality, to be a sport. The thing was without precedent. His resistance weakened. 'And what am I to say to your mother, pray? She's taking her meals downstairs to-day. P'raps you dint know that?'

Bob shrugged his shoulders. He recognized a palpable difficulty. But in a moment he had braced himself to meet and overcome it. 'Tell you what,' he said, leaning intimately across the counter. 'If you're agreeable, *I*'ll tell Ma. This very minute. I will. How's that?'

Egg waited in not unpleasurable agitation until his son returned from this hazardous mission with a cool 'It's all right, I've squared her for you.' The spirit of holiday began dancing in his heart, for it was fun, undeniably fun, and not a little

grand, to be strolling down the road to take luncheon with one's eldest son—for what at home was 'dinner' became 'luncheon' when it cost ninepence (with napkin) and was served at Pardoe's. Bob counted it lucky that they were alone for the latter part of the meal, and when, at its end, he wiped some glistening crumbs of suet from his mouth and expressed this opinion for the third time, it was evident that something important was to be discussed.

'Well?' said Egg. 'So you want a word with me, do you, my boy?'

'You're right,' said Bob. 'I do, and that's a fact.' He coughed nervously, and his face became slowly crimsoned over with embarrassment. 'I'm going to get married, Dad. That's about the size of it.' He stroked the downy beginnings of a moustache, striving to look manly and casual, and succeeding in looking at least ten years old. Egg had never liked the young man so much before.

'I see,' said Egg. He was envious and he was compassionate. 'And you 'aven't told your mother?'

'You bet I haven't.'

'And you don't much like the job?'

'Can't say I do,' admitted Bob, staring down at his dirty plate and shuffling his feet in confusion. 'And there's reasons enough for that. Fact is, I want you to promise to say nothing about it till I give the word.'

Egg stared. He was this boy's father, and something had got to be done about this affair.

'Well, out with it, my boy. Who's the girl?' It occurred to him—and he half-smiled at the thought—that he ought to have asked that question before. But until this moment he had almost forgotten that his son's marriage involved a particular girl, and not the vague and radiant embodiment of young girlhood that in his own mind was evoked by what he had been told.

'Well,' said Bob, speaking very slowly, with long painful pauses between his phrases, 'that's the trouble, you see. I don't know that you'll be so extra special pleased about it. It's not a girl you know. Don't suppose you've ever seen her. In fact I'm jolly well sure you haven't. She lives out Keston way.'

Egg's agitation provoked him to sarcasm. 'Has she got a name, this girl, as well as an address?'

'Kitty Dyce is her name, and—well, she's all right, naturally.' Bob hurried past the question of her personal excellence. 'I'm . . . we . . . she . . . well, we're pretty far gone on each other, if you want to know. So that's that,' finished Bob defiantly.

Egg considered this pronouncement. He could hardly believe that they were at the end of the story. 'And what's all this about your not telling your mother? That don't seem to fit in somehow. She's got to be told, you know that 'swell as I do.'

'She'll have to be told some time, of course,' agreed Bob. 'But not yet. I'd rather she wasn't.'

Egg became peevish. 'That's silly talk. Still I

suppose you can keep it quiet for a bit if you're so set on it. But whyja bring *me* into it?'

Bob looked up in astonishment. 'Well, that's a funny way to take it, Dad, I *must* say. You wouldn't a had me get married without telling *anybody*, would you! Not you! You'd a bin the first to complain. I thought being a man you'd understand how a chap feels.'

'All right!' said Egg. 'Steady does it, my boy. Don't excite yourself. But I *don't* understand, not yet I don't. You 'aven't told me everything. By the way you're talking it looks to me as though you want to make a fool of yourself. Want to get married to-morrow, I suppose. Is that it?'

'That's it, near enough,' muttered Bob sulkily.

'Bob!' said Egg, eyeing his son sternly. 'Are you talking serious?'

'You bet I am!'

'You think you can get married, and you not turned twenty-two and earning next to nothing a week! Tie yourself up for life to some girl you've just said How-d'ye-do to! For life, mind you. For *life*. I know what I'm talking of, so make no mistake about it.'

'It's to be a secret marriage,' said Bob, trying to take no notice of his father's outburst. 'That's why I'm telling you. We shan't set up house, not for a year or two, not till I've made my way a bit. She'll go on at her work, and I'll go on at mine, and no one will know we're married at all till . . . they do. Only I thought I'd like you to know, you being a man.'

Egg was touched and grateful, but he thought it his duty to dissemble gratitude. 'Work? What's she working at?'

'Well, that's just it,' explained Bob, at once eager and sheepish. 'Mother's got such big ideas, I'd never hear the last of it. She's . . . well, she's a general servant, if you want to know, down Keston way.'

Egg remained deep in thought for a few minutes. At last he said: 'There's worse things than general servants. My own mother was in service once, and I never died of it. And there's an aunt of yours——'

'I know!' Bob was triumphant. ''Tisn't our place to be high and mighty. And I wouldn't care if she was a gutter-girl, for myself. It was only Ma I was thinking of.'

'Yes, I daresay,' remarked Egg. 'But there's more in it than that, my boy. What's the hurry? That's what you haven't told me. And I'm waiting to hear.'

'There's reasons for hurry,' said Bob.

'Oh, there is, is there!'

'Very good reasons,' said Bob, drawing patterns on the tablecloth with his forefinger. 'It's all my fault, and I'm not going to let her down, and I don't care what anyone says. It was none of her doing.'

'None of her doing, wasn't it!' What a noodle the boy is, thought Egg. Thinks he did it all by himself, I s'pose. 'I'm surprised at you, Bob!' That seemed so inadequate that he added, not with

complete conviction: 'And I'm ashamed of you, what's more!' In both these statements he lied, partly in the interests of good morals, but more because he must at all costs conceal from Bob how greatly alarmed and horrified he was by the prospect of a scandal in the family. Fancy having to break this news to Carrie! It was too dreadful to be faced. But the next instant it flashed into his mind how years ago, when he was Bob's age, he had carried upstairs Jinny Randall heavy with her child and Willy's; and he yearned towards his son, but could only repeat: 'I'm ashamed of you!' And he added, in real exasperation: 'First Harold, then you! It's too much of a good thing!'

'Harold!' Bob's eyes widened with curiosity. 'What's young Harold been up to?'

'Nothing at all!' snapped Egg. 'He knows how to behave himself, Harold does. Which is more than you do, seemingly.'

'Oh, you don't understand,' said Bob wearily. 'I don't suppose you've ever felt like Kitty and me feel. Pretty clear you haven't. You've never been what I'd call in love, have you?'

Egg, having essayed irony several times in this interview, now for the first time achieved it. 'No, my boy, I never have. Old fogey like me, don't know what love is. Suppose you tell me, eh?'

Not entirely obtuse, Bob had the grace to blush for himself. 'Anyway, Dad, you see how it is. I want to marry her. Quite apart from all this bother, I want to marry her. And I've just got to. You do see that, don't you?"

They rose, paid their bill, and walked back to the shop. As they crossed the threshold together, Egg took his son's arm and slightly, shyly, pressed it, grateful that the boy had not thought it necessary to demand a formal promise of secrecy. The future—at which for a moment he cocked a timid speculative eye—could hold little but storm for him, dark days and angry seas. Pandervil's was still yielding no more than a precarious livelihood, and Harold was the most reluctant of assistants. To look forward was no better than to look back, and to look back was bitterness. Passion, for him, had flowered vainly; budded and blossomed and spilled its scent in a desolate place and was now withered away. Yet there remained things in life that he would have been reluctant to lose. There was this belated feeling of kinship with his eldest son. There was friendship and neighbourliness, saying How-do to familiar faces, a pipe of tobacco of an evening when Carrie had gone early to bed, and a quiet read of the noozepaper, and summer mornings, and the way the slate roofs of the High Street glistened after rain. And, to-night, there was Nicky to be bathed.

5

The bath, which failed to resemble porcelain only because it looked somehow better than porcelain, so cunningly had the paint been applied—the bath demands a word to itself. It was new; it was Selina's pride and care; it possessed two brass taps

that were polished every day and never used (hot water was carried upstairs in saucepans); and it was the monument to a great event. It was Uncle Algy, and he alone, who had instantly with a prescience little short of extraordinary, recognized the greatness of the event. While others joined hearts, and sometimes voices, in deploring that yet another child was born to Carrie and Egg, Uncle Algy, paying them one of his infrequent but regular visits, was as hearty in his applause as he had been on previous and similar occasions; the house echoed with his 'Bray-vo, *Carrie!* Bray-vo, *Egg!* Bray-vo, *Baby!*' And, with a change of accent that gave new and hearty emphasis to his pleasure and surprise: 'Bray-*vo!*' Ever since his unexpected emancipation from farm-work and his espousal both of auctioneering and Aunty Min, Uncle Algy had bounced through life like a balloon—for time persisted in inflating him—heartily applauding and patronizing everything. And here at last was something to which with aptness as well as enthusiasm he could apply his favourite adjective; for Nicky was indeed little, the very smallest baby, thought Egg (who was no judge, however), that had ever been born. 'I *'ad* thought of spoons, Carrie,' said Uncle Algy surprisingly. 'I 'ad thought of a silver spoon, y'know, Eggie old son. But no, 'e don't want spoons. And besides there's plenty of such in the house already. Ha ha ha! No, seriously, Eggie, what I'll do is I'll give him a bath, old boy. Hear that, Carrie? I'll give the little man a bath. Blest if I don't!' Carrie, fail-

ing to seize his drift, objected that he would take and drop the child, a remark of which Uncle Algy reminded her upon every succeeding visit. And when the bath came, newfangled affair though it was and a ridiculous expense no doubt, Carrie allowed it was very handsome of Uncle Algy. And Egg was overwhelmed to the point of feeling awkward about it. 'That's nothing, old boy. Nothing at all, is it, Min, my dear!' For Uncle Algy was by way of being a rich relation, and though he took a franker pleasure in savouring his generosity than modern delicacy would approve, one could hardly grudge him his naive self-approval. 'I haven't exactly gone down in the world, Eggie, and I won't pretend I have. But I'm never too big to remember old times, boy, and blood's thicker than water, whatever you may say.' And so here, mute witness to the inferior density of water, stood Nicky's bath; and though its taps were not connected to a cistern, it had a real plughole, with a plug that hung on a stout chain, and the water that was carried up by Selina did not need to be carried down again but escaped through a waste-pipe to the cesspool at the end of the garden. Here stood the bath, and here, with his father in attendance, was Nicky ready to use it.

Well, not quite ready, for first he must be undressed. 'Shall I be a rabbit, Dad, and you skin me?'

Egg thought this a good plan. He whipped out an imaginary knife and skinned his rabbit expertly. He was always surprised that Nicky, who had in-

vented it, did not find this a rather gruesome game.

'Oooo!' cried Nicky.

'Does it hurt?' asked Egg.

'It hurts something awful,' said Nicky. His father stared down into his face. Nicky gravely returned the look. 'It only pretends to hurt, you know.'

Footsteps approached the door; went past; came back; stopped. 'Eggie dear!' It was Carrie's voice.

'Yes, Mother?' answered Egg.

Carrie came in. The two Pandervils faced her with questions in their eyes. 'I'm bad again,' said Carrie. 'Whether you like it or not, you better know. I'm going to bed.'

'Can I do anything for you? Make you something hot? Rub you?'

'I'm going to bed,' said Carrie. 'Oh no, you can't do anything. I must bear the cross alone if it's God's will, though what I've done to deserve all this pain I *don't* know. I'm going back to bed, and never oughta 'ave left it. People don't know 'ow bad it takes me. But never mind.' She paused at the door, and added in raised tones: 'And there's another thing, Father. You'll have to speak to Daniel.'

'Speak to 'im?'

'Yes, speak to 'im. He's not treating my girl right. Not by a long way he isn't.'

'What's he bin doing?' asked Egg. 'I *thought* there was something 'smorning.'

'Fast and loose,' said Carrie. 'On the drink and worse. There's a lot o' dirty sluts in this town, let me tell you. Wish I could lay me 'ands on 'em. Not that I'd *touch* 'em. I should think not indeed! You gotta speak to 'im about it.'

'Um,' said Egg.

'Oh, you may *um!*' retorted Carrie angrily. 'You oughta never a let my girl marry a man like that.' She went out, slamming the door behind her.

'What's dirty sluts?' asked Nicky.

'Stuff you get in the water after your bath,' said Egg. 'That soapy scummy stuff as you see wriggling down into the plughole. Now, are we ready?'

Nicky made a mysterious face enjoining silence. He crept closer to his father and whispered: 'There might be a mouse in the bath, you know. So we must go very quietly and take a peep. Shall we?'

They did.

'There he goes,' whispered Nicky hoarsely. 'Can you see him?'

'Yes. Don't he swim fast!' exclaimed Egg admiringly.

'He's not *swimming*,' said Nicky reproachfully. He's running. On top of the water, like Jesus. He does run fast, don't he? And in a minute he'll run faster and faster and faster and faster.'

'Shouldn't wonder,' agreed Egg.

Such a possibility was worth watching for.

'I told you he would!' said Nicky. 'He ran as fast as a real one, didn't he!'

In due time Nicky suffered himself to be hoisted into the water and to be soaped and sponged all over. He talked a great deal throughout these processes, and Egg, who privately believed, without irony or reservation of any kind, that this was the pleasantest and cleverest child in the world, sustained his part of the conversation with an unvarying gravity of demeanour and a dancing lightness of heart. And the moment came when Nicky, fortified by his father's presence, found courage to pull the plug up by its chain. With Selina it was a different matter, for the last gurgle of the water was apt, with the help of her artful fancies, to bear a very sinister interpretation. Egg was more genial company, and, when that funny ugly noise did at last occur, Nicky was able to shout with a pleasure unalloyed by fear: 'Go away, you dirty sluts!' And as he lifted the pink and steaming child out of the bath and planted him carefully on the cork mat, this elderly grocer chanced to recall an odd saying that his own mother had been wont to use on bath-nights, more than half a century before, in Mershire. 'And now,' said Egg Pandervil, 'you're fit to kiss the ladies!'

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